How has the annual commemoration of ʻAshura affected, shaped and informed Shi'a-Sunni current relations in Iraq?

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ABSTRACT

This doctoral thesis aims to explore the impact of the annual commemoration of ‘Ashura on contemporary Shi‘a-Sunni relations in Iraq. ‘Ashura itself is the name given to the tenth day of the month of Muharram, the first month of the Islamic lunar calendar. It was on this day, in 680, that Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammed, was killed in Karbala, Iraq by the army of a perceived unjust and corrupt Caliph, Yazid (Husain, 2018). The episode at Karbala profoundly impacted Muslims and divided them not only in Iraq but in the wider Muslim world, and continues to be a source of contemporary dissension (Husain, 2018). It has generated traditions and particularly rituals of public mourning among a minority within the Islamic *ummah* (community) who came to be known as the Shi‘a (Husain, 2018, p. 57). The Shi‘a annually commemorate the tragedy of Karbala because from their perspective, Islam as a religion has been maintained by the sacrifice of Husayn in Karbala (Nakash, 1993). Fearing dissension, there is a tendency to ignore the significance of the killing of Husayn among the majority within the Islamic *ummah* who came to be known as the Sunni (Husain, 2018).

In Iraq, the commemoration of ‘Ashura, which has evolved according to the Iraqi social and political context, can be considered as the most defining ritual that identifies the Shi‘a, a majority of the population, and that separates them from the Sunni, a sizable minority. Nevertheless, following the establishment of Iraq as a political entity in 1921 and up until 2003, the Sunnis held power, and the commemorations of ‘Ashura were initially restricted and then banned (Chatelard, 2017). When the regime of Saddam Hussein was toppled in 2003, the Shi‘a assumed power for the first time since the establishment of Iraq as a modern state in 1921. Since 2003, therefore, the commemoration of ‘Ashura has emerged as the most powerful cultural, religious and political event in Iraq (Al-Hilli, 2017; Pierre, Hutchinson and Abdulrazak, 2007). In recent years, millions of Shi‘a, from Iraq and further afield, have visited Karbala to observe *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*, that is a ritual involving visiting Husayn’s shrine on the 40th day after ‘Ashura (Chatelard, 2017).

This thesis aims to explore the ways the commemoration of ‘Ashura has impacted present-day Shi‘a-Sunni relations in Iraq by using the theoretical framework of Structural Ritualization Theory (Knottnerus, 2012) to which some valuable cultural theories by the Iraqi sociologist, ‘Ali al-Wardi

have contributed. Together with the previous, the analysis of data collected between 2016 and 2019 has been useful to test both theories and to advance some initial conclusions, for instance that the Shi‘a religious establishment has strategically used *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* to spread their influence and to inculcate Shi‘a symbols into Iraqi national identity. The mourning rituals have also used strategically to unite the Shi‘a and to intimidate their enemies, including the radicalised Sunni splinter group ISIS, of noted relevance in recent times. Furthermore, the analysis of the data suggests that the rituals contribute to raising sensitivities between Shi‘a and Sunni Iraqis.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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For me, pursuing PhD studies was always a dream. As someone grow up in Iraq, I felt passionately about exploring issues related to Iraqi culture and tradition. Professor Hilary Robertson, my academic supervisor for my MSc thesis in conflict studies, and who became a mentor, recognised and encouraged my passion for research, for that I wish to thank her. Special thanks also goes to Stephen de Boer for his ultimate and unconditional support for achieving my goals. I was also blessed by my mother's *dua'a* (praying).

I am fortunate to be in Heriot-Watt University, it has been a remarkable and life turning experience. Heriot-Watt and for that matter, Edinburgh, will remain one of the most important and exciting chapters in my life.

DEDICATION

To Iraqis who suffered or lost their lives because of Iraq-Iran war (1980-1988), sanctions (1990s), the United States-led invasion (2003), terrorist attacks and militia brutalities (post-2003), and to those who had no other choice but to flee their country.

DECLARATION STATEMENT

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A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

Translations of Arabic interviews, comments on social media, and quotations in Arabic, are my own. The transliteration of the Arabic words is based on a modified version of the system recommended by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (*IJMES*). Given that this thesis contains numerous Arabic names and terminologies, and in order not to overwhelm the readers with diacritic, I have kept the diacritic (‘) for the Arabic consonant *‘ayn* in words such as ‘Ashura, Shi‘a, and *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*, and omitted all other diacritics including (’) for *hamza*. Throughout this thesis, whilst words transliterated from Arabic are generally italicised, exceptions include titles such as Ayatullah, Imam, Sayyid, caliph, and the months of the Muslim calendar. In addition, the plural of Arabic words has been formed by an addition of an ‘s’ to the singular, with the exception of few cases such as *marja‘* and *majlis* for which the plural is *maraji‘*, and *majalis* respectively. Moreover, names with most common English spellings, such as those widely cited in the media and the literature are preserved (examples, Saddam Hussein, and caliph). Finally, in Appendix 1, I defined most relevant and used Arabic words in this thesis.

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1 Introduction

The Muslim world is divided into two main sects; the Shi‘a and Sunni. A brief discussion of the root cause for this division is provided in this introduction and how it was manifested in the killing of the Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad in Karbala in 680. The formation of Shi‘a identity which is based to a large extent on the mourning rituals to commemorate Husayn’s killing is also discussed in this introduction. To understand how such rituals have developed, the annual commemoration of Husayn’s death (of which the ‘Ashura rituals can be seen as the most relevant), will be discussed within a historical and contemporary socio-political context. It is also important to situate ‘Ashura rituals in the light of a Shi‘a-Sunni discourse to make the case for the topic of this thesis, which is about exploring the impact of the mourning rituals over the killing of Husayn on Shi‘a-Sunni relations in Iraq. Finally, the thesis aim and objectives, together with the way it is structured, are provided. The chapter ends with some concluding remarks.

This current division between Shi‘a and Sunni Muslims originated immediately after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632, over the issue of who was the legitimate successor to lead the Islamic *ummah* or community (Nakash, 1994). Some Muslims believed that ‘Ali, the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law was the Prophet’s rightful first heir (Husain, p. 44). They relied on evidence from the Quran and a sermon delivered by the Prophet in 632, at a place called Ghadir Khumm, which suggested that the Prophet appointed ‘Ali as his successor (Husain, 2018; Shomali, 2003). Husain (p. 44) argues that as ‘Ali made the burial arrangements after the Prophet’s death, Abu Bakr, the Prophet’s good friend and father-in-law, met with the Prophet’s companions to discuss who should lead the Muslims. Eventually, they decided that Abu Bakr himself and not ‘Ali should be the new leader of the Muslim community. Perhaps, some thought the 28-year-old ‘Ali was too young to lead whilst others thought he was too pious and mystically minded for the dark arts of politics (Husain, p. 44). Whatever the reasons, Abu Bakr was chosen, and ‘Ali’s followers believed that their leader had been denied his right to rule the Islamic world (Husain, 2018).

At this early moment in Islamic history, ‘Ali’s followers were known as the Shi‘a of ‘Ali, but eventually this term has shortened to the current ‘Shi‘a’ denomination (Shomali, 2003, p. 14). Broadly, the Arabic word ‘Shi‘a’ means ‘a group or supportive party’. The Shi‘a are also known

as the followers of *ahl al-bayt* or the 'People of the Household' of the Prophet (the Prophet, the Prophet's daughter, Fatima, her husband 'Ali, and their two sons, Hassan and Husayn, see Appendix 2) (Halm, 2004). Essentially, the Shi'a are defined as Muslims who follow 'Ali's teaching and believe in his immediate successorship (Shomali, 2003, p. 15). The non-Shi'a Muslims, are known as Sunni. The word 'Sunni' is derived from the Arabic word meaning 'one who mainly follows the traditions of the Prophet' (Husain, 2018, p. 43). This effectively means Sunni Muslims believe that the Prophet left it to the people themselves to decide whom to follow (Shomali, 2003, p. 15).

Despite these differences, both Shi'a and Sunni Muslims share the fundamental beliefs of the religion of Islam, the oneness of the same God, the prophet-hood of Muhammad, and the Quran as the holy book (Halm, 2004). However, in contrast to the Sunni, in Shi'a Islam, after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, the legitimate guardians and interpreters of Divine Law were the Imams, 'Ali and his descendants through his wife, Fatima, the Prophet's daughter (Corboz, 2016, p. 5). The majority of the Shi'a in Iraq grant the Twelve historical Imams a special status and recognise their leadership to guide the Islamic *ummah* after the death of the Prophet (Corboz, 2016, p. 5).

Generally, the Shi'a believe in the Imams' interpretation of Islam and follow their associated practices, a concept known as *Imamah*, or the authority of the Imams (Halm, 2004). The Shi'a also revere the Imams and regard them as infallible (Halm, 2004). In addition, the Shi'a swear solemnly by their Imams, ask them for blessing, and for intercession (Shomali, 2003). In contrast to the Shi'a, Sunni Muslims contend that leadership of the community is not a birth right, but a trust which has to be earned and may be given or taken away by the people themselves, a concept known as *al-Cilapha* (Halm, 2004). This variance in opinion naturally gives rise to numerous differences on cultural and religious matters. For instance, in sharp contrast to the Sunnis, Shi'a Iraqis celebrate the event of Ghadir Khumm, which they believe marks the Prophet's public announcement of 'Ali as his successor, practise the rituals of visiting the Imams' burial sites, and commemorate 'Ashura (Shomali, 2003). For the majority of Sunnis, however, these are improper practices.

The differences between the Shi'a and the Sunni also encompass different interpretations of historical events. From a Shi'a viewpoint, all Imams were either persecuted and/or killed by

caliphs who adhered to the Sunni school of thought (Halm, 2004, p. 43). Moreover, the Shi‘a believe that the last Imam of the Twelve historical Imam*s*, Muhammad al-Mahdi (the Hidden Imam) who went into hiding in 873 to avoid the persecution of the Sunni caliph, al-Mua‘tamd, is the ultimate saviour of humankind and will emerge with Isa (Jesus Christ), in order to fulfil their mission of bringing peace and justice to the world (Halm, 2004). Overall, to this day, Shi‘a maintain loyalty to ‘Ali’s bloodline, whilst Sunnis stress only direct allegiance to the Prophet himself (Husain, 2018, p. 44).

1.1 The contextualisation of the battle of Karbala: accepted history

For a variety of reasons, including disagreements over who would succeed the Prophet Muhammad as the leader of the Muslim faithful, a very tense period emerged following his death in 632, characterised by internal conflict, assassinations and brutal killings, ending with the killing of Muhammad’s grandson, Husayn, in Karbala in 680 (2018, p. 43).

As noted earlier, Abu Bakr succeeded the Prophet to lead the Muslim *ummah.* He became the first of the four Caliphs who ruled after the death of Muhammad who are often described as the *Khulafa Rashidun*, or the rightly-guided caliphs. These caliphs were either elected by a council or chosen based on the wishes of their predecessor. In the order of succession, the *Rashidun* were Abu Bakr, Omar, Othman, and ‘Ali (the son-in-law of the Prophet, who finally deemed to be a worthy successor). As evidence of the instability facing the Islamic *ummah* during this period, three of these right-guided caliphs (Omar, Othman, and ‘Ali) were assassinated (Husain, 2018). In today’s public perception, the first three Caliphs are regarded as Sunnis, mainly because of the perception that they denied ‘Ali his early right to rule the Islamic *ummah* (Husain, 2018, p. 43). ‘Ali is regarded not only as the fourth Caliph, ruling the entire Muslim *ummah*, but also as the first Shi‘a Imam (656-661), and is known as an influential figure in Islam for his knowledge and wisdom (Halm, 2004, Nakash, 1994). He administrated the Islamic *ummah* whilst living in Kufa, Iraq until his assassination in 661, after which he was buried in Najaf, about ten kilometres from Kufa (Shomali, 2003). Unsurprisingly, for his followers, the Shi‘a, Najaf has become one of the holiest cities in Islam (Shomali, 2003).

‘Ali’s assassination has been regarded as a turning point in Islamic history. Following his death, his rival, Mu’awiya ibn Abi Sufyan, the governor of Syria, established the Umayyad dynasty (662-750) by securing the *caliphate* (leadership) for himself and his sons (Nakash, 1994). Many scholars of Islamic studies have argued that unlike the four-guided caliphs who tailored their policies according to Islamic principles and values, the Umayyad caliphs tailored Islamic principles and values to fit their own policies and ambitions (al-Wardi, 2005; Nakash, 1994; Nasr, 2016). Nakash notes that in his effort to secure the leadership, Mu’awiya successfully ensured the abdication of ‘Ali’s son Hassan, the second Shi‘a Imam, possibly by promising him that the *caliphate* would revert to Hassan after Mu’awaiya’s death. However, Hassan died eight years later, poisoned by his own wife at the instigation of Mu’awaiya who, before dying in 680, arranged for his son Yazid to succeed him (Nakash, 1994). According to many accounts, Yazid was corrupt, unjust, and did not follow Islamic principles (Husain, 2018; Shomali, 2003). Following the poisoning of Hassan, Husayn, his younger brother and the third Shi‘a Imam, did not feel bound by Hassan’s agreement with Mu’awaiya, and decided to rise up against the unjust caliph, Yazid (Nakash, 1994).

Accompanied by a small party of companions as well as by his womenfolk and children, Husayn set out from Mecca to Kufa, where the people had urged him to come in order to lead the opposition against the caliph, Yazid (Nakash, 1994, p. 141). Most of the inhabitants of Kufa perceived Yazid as unjust and thus paid allegiance to Husayn, asking for his support to rid them of this hostile ruler. However, upon Husayn’s arrival to a place known as the plain of Karbala, about eighty-five kilometres from Kufa, he was intercepted and besieged by an overwhelming Muslim army led by Yazid (Nakash, 1994). This ambush occurred on the first day of the first month of the Islamic calendar, Muharram. During the first ten days of Muharram, Husayn witnessed the killing of his two sons, ‘Ali al-Akbar and ‘Ali al-Asghar, the latter barely a six-month-old, his step-brother, Abbas, and other male companions (Husain, 2018, p. 54). On the tenth day, which in known as ‘Ashura-meaning ‘ten’ in the Arabic language, the battle raged and Husayn was killed. With the exception of the women, including Zainab, Husayn’s sister, and his young child, ‘Ali Zayn al-Abidin, who were taken captive by Yazid’s army, all his other companions were killed on that day (Nakash, 1994). It is relevant to this discussion to note that the people of Kufa, who asked for Husayn’s support, did not fight with him in Karbala despite his many attempts to call upon them for support. Fearing for their lives, they refrained from engaging (Nakash, 1994).

1.2 Karbala and the formation of the Shi‘a identity

Whilst it could be argued that division among Muslims occurred immediately following the Prophet’s death, over the issue of who was the legitimate successor, the division only properly crystallised after the Battle of Karbala (Husain, 2018; Nakash, 1994). In this regard, Nakash (1994, p. 161) argues that, although prior to Husayn’s death Muslims were already divided into two main groups defined by their degree of support for ‘Ali, a Shi‘a community distinguished by its own rituals and collective memory did not exist at that point. It would be mainly through commemorating the death of Husayn, according to Nakash, that the Shi‘a would form a distinct sectarian identity (p. 161).

The first to mourn the death of Husayn were his sister Zainab, and other female members of Husayn’s family. In addition, a group of people known as *tawwabun* or penitents, most of whom were from Kufa and were said to have been deeply regretful for not supporting Husayn at the Battle of Karbala, gathered at the site of Husayn’s grave and mourned both his death and the fact that they were not there to die alongside him (Nakash, 1994). The *tawwabun* composed and recited poetry that praised Husayn and chanted their slogan *Ya la-Tharat al-Husayn* (“O, the avengers of Husayn”), all the while agreeing to reunite in the future to avenge his death (Nakash, 1994).

The account of the *tawwabun* meeting on the annual anniversary of Husayn’s death in Karbala marks the earliest evidence of an annual commemoration of ‘Ashura in Iraq (Halm, 2004, p. 35). The *ziyara* or ritual grave visitation became later a highly ritualised aspect of the commemoration ceremonies initiated by the *tawwabun*. Given the significance of Husayn’s grave, the plain of Karbala emerged as a sacred site and the associated city soon turn into one of the holiest cities for the Shi‘a (Norton, 2011, p. 113).

The mourning rituals of ‘Ashura were further developed by successive Shi‘a Imams (Shomali, 2003). It is reported that Imam Jaafar al-Sadiq (702–765), the sixth Shi‘a Imam, said crying and intense distress is disapproved for a worshipper unless it is for Husayn bin ‘Ali (Shomali, 2003). The Imam Al-Sadiq, therefore, treated the mourning rituals over Husayn as an exceptional case, different from other rituals of mourning. Other Shi‘a Imams also emphasised the differential case of Husayn’s commemoration, declaring that people are rewarded (blessed) for showing the signs of mourning. Related sayings of other Shi‘a Imams also urged Shi‘a to perform mourning rituals

at different times during the year, not only during ‘Ashura (Shomali, 2003). In short, the Imams instructed their followers to commemorate the killing of Husayn in order to preserve his memory and the fact that he sacrificed himself and his family to fight injustice and tyranny (Shomali, 2003). In light of the disappearance of the last Imam, a religious establishment known in the Arabic language as the *marja‘iyya* gradually emerged to guide the Shi‘a until his reappearance.

1.3 The *marja‘iyya*

Broadly, the *marja‘iyya* is the Shi‘a community of scholars. Traditionally, the term is often used to refer to the Shi‘a religious scholars or the *mujtahids*, whose main role was to transmit what was considered a complete and comprehensive law laid down by the infallible Imams (Corboz, 2016, p. 5). Gradually, and not without much doctrinal debate, as Corboz (2016, p. 5) argues, the *marja‘iyya* reached maturity in the first half of the sixteenth century. It should be noted that the concept of *marja‘iyya* is unique to Shi‘ism; the Sunni have no such central religious authority because as noted earlier, they do not believe in the concept of *Imamah*.

According to Gleave (2007), in Shi‘ism, the non-*mujtahids* are the *ammi* or common people are obliged to follow or imitate (*taqlid*) a *marja‘*- a *mujtahid* who is seen to be qualified to provide guidance on all points of religious practices and law. Therefore, it is the norm that the lay Shi‘as turn to a *marja‘* (plural-*maraji‘*) for guidance on religious life, ritual duties and, increasingly, political activity (Gleave, 2007). In theory, though, as they have no priestly status or sacred function of their own, the *mujtahids* only act as intermediaries between believers and, in his absence, the last Imam, al-Mahdi (Corboz, 2016).

Corboz (2016, p. 6) argues that in comparison to the Catholic Church, there is a lack of institutionalised procedures for the designation of the *maraji‘*, which makes the *marja‘iyya* an informal system of religious authority. It is known though, that the superiority in learning along with family connections is a criterion to establish a ranking order among the *mujtahid*. The *mujtahids*, however, do not form a homogeneous group, and therefore, disagreement among them is not uncommon (Nakash, 1994). They also compete to claim the Shi‘i clerical leadership. The *marja‘* who represents and leads the *marja‘iyya*, could act as the general deputy and not a replacement of the Hidden Imam, al-Mahdi, until his salvific return.

With the victory of the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, the traditional role of the *marja'iyya* came to an end when the *marja'iyya* assumed political power. The creation of the position of guardian-jurist in 1979 at the head of the Iranian state instituted a new and competitive model of clerical leadership. After the constitutional amendments of 1989, a *marja'* or simply a religious scholar aware of the circumstances of his time was given the right to rule. This guardianship was aimed at not only the Iranian nation but also the *ummah* at large. Accordingly, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902-1989) and 'Ali Khamenei after him have made a bid to the leadership of the Shi'a in competition with other *maraji'*.

In Iraq, since the fall of Saddam Hussein as the head of the Ba'ath regime in 2003, and the ascendancy of Shi'a power that followed, the *marja'iyya* has become the most influential religious institution in terms of their scope of authority and it is reasonable to argue that it currently exerts considerable influence over Shi'a political parties, Shi'a clergy and Shi'a laity (Corboz, 2016). However, unlike the *marja'iyya* in Iran, the *marja'iyya* in Iraq have no official political status. Whilst there are number of *maraji'* in Iraq today, 'Ali al-Sistani is regarded as the most senior and most influential *marja'* (Nakash, 2005, p. 7). Overall, in the post-2003 Iraq context, the term *marja'iyya* referenced throughout the thesis specifically refers to al-Sistani's leadership and his network.

Acting as the general deputy of the hidden Imam, and in line with the views of the Imams, the *marja'iyya* has been a great advocate of the commemoration of 'Ashura (Nakash, 1993). All *mujtahids* have diligently narrated the Imams instructions and views on the tragedy of Karbala and particularly observed the mourning rituals of 'Ashura. They promote and sponsor 'Ashura rituals in order to transmit the narrative of Karbala to their followers. In fact, Nakash (1993, p. 162) explains that the evocation of the Karbala episode was left to the rituals of remembrance that developed around the annual commemoration of 'Ashura. Such rituals, Nakash argues, have provided the Shi'a with an opportunity to tell their story "because it is in these rituals that the world lived and the world as imagined are fused together" (p. 162). Given the centrality of the episode of Karbala, the Shi'a religious establishment tend to have their base in shrine cities, Najaf, Al-Kadhemiyya, Samarra, but especially Karbala. Karbala serves as a place for Shi'a to gather, to visit the shrines of Husayn and of his brother Abbas, who died with him, and to mourn their deaths.

Similar to Najaf, Karbala, which is about eighty kilometres away, has become a centre for Shi‘a studies and knowledge. In addition, the population of both cities is predominately Shi‘a (al-Wardi, 1969, Nakash, 1994).

Overall, and to a great extent as a result of the battle of Karbala, the Shi‘a developed a distinct identity that has survived for more than 12 centuries. The historical Shi‘a Imams and their contemporary representative, the Shi‘a religious establishment, adopted and developed a doctrine centred on the episode of Karbala and attempt to influence the common Shi‘a to commemorate ‘Ashura. For the Shi‘a, Karbala has emerged a source of inspiration, a holy place to live, visit and learn.

1.4 Contextualisation of ‘Ashura rituals within Shi‘a-Sunni discourse

The mourning rituals of ‘Ashura, which have been practiced since the death of Husayn in Karbala, have evolved and passed through various stages reaching the form and content they have today (Al-Haidari, 2007; Jabar, 2010, Nakash, 1994). Although in depth analysis about ‘Ashura rituals and Shi‘a-Sunni relations will be provided in Chapter Four, the following is a brief discussion for making the argument that it is worth investigating the impact of the annual commemoration of ‘Ashura on Shi‘a-Sunni relations in Iraq.

In Iraq, where the Shi’a are the majority (65%) and the Sunni form a sizable minority (35%) (World Population Review; Shomali, 2003, p. 155), the mourning rituals of ‘Ashura certainly highlight Shi’a identity and clearly underscore the sect’s demarcation (Nasr, 2016). Despite being a majority, following the establishment of Iraq as a political entity in 1921 and up until 2003, the Sunnis held power (Chatelard, 2017). Successive Sunni-dominated governments adopted and maintained the policies of containing the *marja‘iyya* and restriction, control, and even abolishment of the commemoration of ‘Ashura, especially the public processions of *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*. According to Nakash (1994, p. 157), from the government perspective, “this was considered essential for the establishment of the state’s authority and to break down sectarian boundaries in Iraq”. Attempts to contain the *marja‘iyya* and restrict the commemoration further increased under the rule of the Ba‘ath Party (1968-2003), a nationalist pan-Arab political and revolutionary movement. The Ba‘ath Party implemented a zero-tolerance policy against the mourning

processions of ‘Ashura, especially *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*- visiting the shrine of Husayn on the fortieth day after ‘Ashura, which also known as *al-Arba‘in*, which alienated the Shi‘a and tainted their relations with the regime (Haddad, 2011).

Since 2003, and under the rule of Shi‘a-dominated governments, all the restrictions aimed at containing the commemoration of ‘Ashura crumbled, leading to a powerful and eye-catching commemoration to emerge in Iraq. In fact, the commemoration of ‘Ashura has become the most powerful cultural, religious, and political event in Iraq, and today millions of Shi‘a practice the rituals (Chatelard, 2017). The modern-day commemoration of ‘Ashura takes place during the first two months of the Islamic calendar, Muharram and Safar. Broadly, the two months’ commemoration include; *majalis al-‘Aza* or memorial services, visits to Husayn’s shrine in Karbala on ‘Ashura day and on *al-Arba‘in* (*ziyarat al-Arba‘in*), processions, *tashabih* or play, and a ritual known as *rikdhet* (run) Tweareej where on ‘Ashura day, large numbers of Shi’a participate in a run which starts from a town near Karbala towards the Husayn shrine (al-Haidari, 2007). All of these rituals seem to function as components of a powerful, adaptable, and multifaceted mourning system (al-Haidari, 2007). According to al-Haidari (2007), not all of the rituals have to be practiced; it is up to the discretion of a Shi‘a individual to choose. In addition, depending on the context and the individual, ‘Ashura rituals can be practiced in its traditional form, to gain salvation in the afterlife as well as in this lifetime, and in a modern form, to strive for political awareness, and social involvement (Szanto, 2013, p. 78). In Shi‘a doctrine, the two month annual commemoration can be understood as a concentrated mourning period because the mourning for Imam Husayn is perpetual, ‘every place is Karbala and every day is ‘Ashura’ (Nakash, 1993, p. 164). This is especially true for the Shi‘a religious establishment, where the commemoration of ‘Ashura is not limited to the two month mourning period and therefore. References made to the episode of Karbala by the Shi‘a religious establishment throughout the year are regarded as part of the commemoration of the killing of Imam Husayn. It is this overall understanding of the commemoration of the tragedy of Karbala that is embraced and adopted in this thesis as topic of research.

Narratives of the injustice and suffering that Husayn and other members of *ahl al-bayt* endured at Karbala expressed through the commemoration throughout the year trigger deep emotions in the

Shi‘a (al-Haidari, 2007; Nakash, 1994). As well as the personal impact, the entire country’s infrastructure runs the risk of being affected by the commemoration due to road blockages for processions, and the ancillary impact of extra security measures, such as checkpoints, to protect Shi‘a mourners (Chatelard, 2017).

Muslims, however, have different views on the commemoration of the Ashura mainly because they interpret the battle of Karbala differently. In fact, it is accepted that the battle of Karbala contributed to dividing Muslims into two main sects, the Shi‘a and the Sunni, and that the Shi‘a sect currently represent approximately 11-15% of the Muslim world (Nasr, 2016, p. 34; Shomali, 2003, p. 153). The division is regarded as highly controversial due to the high-profile individuals involved at the time, with Husayn on one side and the Caliph Yazid (acting as the Prophet’s successor) on the other side (Husain, 2018). Husain (2018, p. 57) notes that, when most Sunni Muslims are asked today about the death of Husayn in Karbala they feel regret, remorse, and distress that the Prophet’s beloved grandson was killed by a Muslim caliph, but they do not grasp the intricacies of what happened and tend to play down the event somehow, because they fear *fitna*, or dissension. In contrast, the Shi‘a commemorate the tragedy of Karbala annually by practicing ‘Ashura rituals. They believe that ignoring the significance of the sacrifice of Husayn implies Husayn’s killers have symbolically won the battle (Husain, 2018; Khomeini, 2000).

On the other hand, many Sunnis recognise ‘Ashura as a blessed day consistent with the *Sunna* or tradition of the Prophet, although they do not mark it as the day that Husayn was killed (Dewji and Alidina, 2012, p. 138). According to Sunni scholars, supported by *hadith*, a quotation by the Prophet Muhammad, Muslims are encouraged to fast on the day of ‘Ashura in order to follow the tradition of the Prophet, who also fasted on this day, in order to honour *Allah*’s will in saving Moses and the Israelites from the Egyptian pharaoh (p. 138).

Despite this relative coincidence on the relevance of the day of ‘Ashura, the narrative adopted in the Shi’a rituals tends to enflame and provokes an emotional response within participants which, in turn, is often perceived as provocative by the Sunnis particularly when some well-regarded historical Sunni figures are cursed (Al-Kateib, 2007, p. 191). In fact, according to Pierre, Hutchinson and Abdulrazak (2007, p. 63), the annual commemoration is seen as an implicit reminder to the Sunnis that the Shi’as will never forget the killing of their Imam and this could

certainly be considered a significant factor in shaping and influencing the relationship between them.

It should be noted that both Shi‘a and Sunni Iraqis are not homogenous groups. Also, generally, there is no perceptible socio-economic divide between both communities in Iraq today. Many scholars have described Shi‘a-Sunni relations in Iraq as complex and complicated due to different interpretations of historical events and geo-politics (Haddad, 2011, Mansour, 2017; Marechal and Zemni, 2013). According to Haddad (2011), Shi‘a-Sunni tensions have increased after 2003, as have terrorist activities targeting all Iraqis. During the civil war between Shi‘a and Sunni Iraqis (2006 -2007) that followed the restoration of the Shi‘a to political predominance, members of both sects engaged in terrorist activities targeting each other. What has further complicated their relations since then is the rise of ISIS (the Islamic state), a Sunni jihadist group, in Iraq in 2014; the rise of Shi‘a militias including *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi* (Popular Mobilisation Forces) as powerful forces; and the proxy war between Iran, a Shi‘a state, and Saudi Arabia, a Wahhabi (an extreme form of Sunni Islam) majority state (Haddad, 2011, 2015; Nasr, 2016). In the midst of this complicated reality, this research study focus on exploring the impact of the commemoration of ‘Ashura on Shi‘a-Sunni relations in Iraq.

On a regional level, Pierre, Hutchinson and Abdulrazak (2007, p. 67) have argued that Sunni Arab leaders are unsurprisingly wary of the symbolism of ‘Ashura. They perceive ‘Ashura rituals as a threat from the Shi‘a, who make up 29% of Muslims in the Middle East, and fear for the security of their own regimes especially given the Iranian expansionist ideology advocated during the Iranian revolution in 1979. In this highly-charged environment, exploring the impact of ‘Ashura rituals on Shi‘a-Sunni relations in Iraq, the first Arab country with a Shi’a majority government in power (Iran is not regarded as an Arab country), is more than warranted.

1.5 Research aim and objective

Following on from the contextualisation of the rituals within Shi‘a-Sunni discourse, this academic study endeavours to explore the impact of the annual commemoration of ‘Ashura on Shi‘a-Sunni relations in Iraq. To explore the ways ‘Ashura rituals impact Shi‘a-Sunni relations, the following

central research question is proposed: *how has the annual commemoration of 'Ashura affected, shaped and informed Shi'a-Sunni current relations in Iraq*?

With the increasing power of the Shi'a after 2003 in Iraq, the objective of this study is to direct attention to critical ways in which 'Ashura rituals have impacted Shi'a-Sunni relations. In particular, the objectives are to investigate who sponsors the commemoration, which elements of the mourning rituals are more prominent, what purpose do they serve, what are their social implications and how such social implications feedback into the rituals themselves. In demographic terms, therefore, this work focuses on Sunni and Shi'a communities in Iraq, with other ethnic and religious groups, such as the Kurdish population, excluded (see Figure 1 highlighted in green).

To fulfill the study's aims and objectives, an empirical approach was adopted because this approach relies on evidence of an empirical nature and not of a metaphysical nature, so that it can be critically explored. In that regard, this qualitative study applied a theoretical approach which is underpinned by Structural Ritualisation Theory, hereafter SRT (Knottnerus, 1997), facilitating an exploration of the mourning rituals of 'Ashura through a new lens. SRT, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter Three, does not regard rituals as mundane acts, neither does it dismiss them as irrelevant or irrational; rather it considers them as crucial human behaviours with consequences and impact (Knottnerus, 2012). In addition, the SRT frequently focuses on the ways rituals are used as tools by powerful groups to reshape society for their own interest.

Given that SRT has not previously been applied within the context of predominantly Muslim and Arab society, this thesis also has the work of Iraqi sociologist 'Ali al-Wardi as part of its theoretical frame, which brings his extensive knowledge of fundamental cultural and religious practices to bear on the analysis and discussion of the data.

Finally, this research commenced in September 2015 and concluded in September 2019, and therefore coincided with the rise and fall of ISIS. Consequently, data collection and analysis reflected this specific crucial period. Within this period, the commemoration of 'Ashura, especially *ziyarat al-Arba'in,* on the twentieth of Safar, millions of Shi'a Iraqis relived the atmosphere of the battle of Karbala (al-Hilli, 2017). The twentieth of Safar, known as *al-Arba'in* in the Arabic

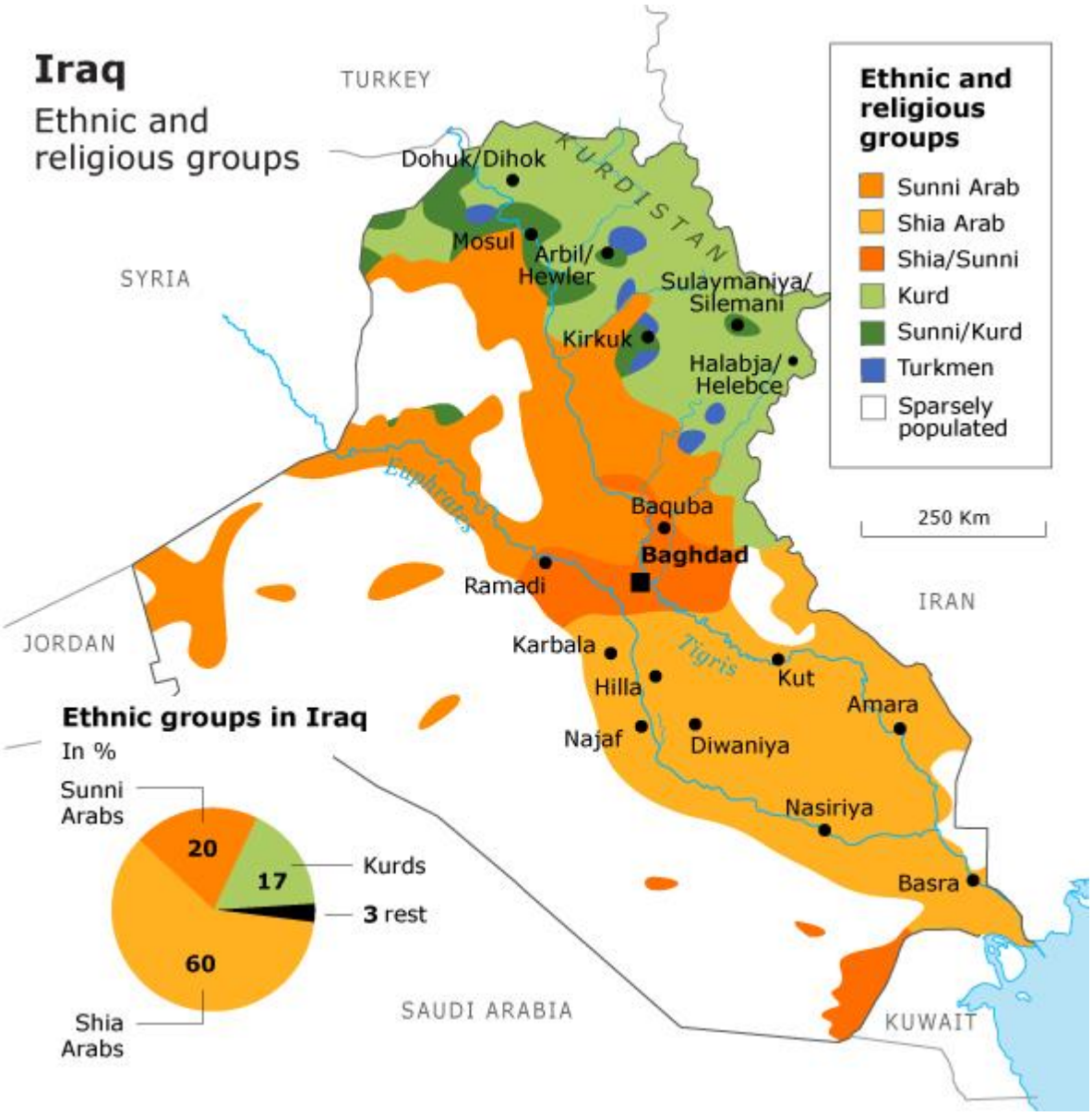


Figure 1 *A map showing the distribution of Sunni, Shi'a, and Kurds in Iraq***.** (*Source*; *the Above Network, LLC*)

language, which means fortieth day after 'Ashura, is significant given that the Shi'a believe that, on this particular day, Husayn's head, which was taken to Damascus to be shown to Yazid was returned and buried with his body in Karbala (al-Hilli, 2017). In addition, this day signifies the return of the women, who were taken captive after the killing of Husayn, to Karbala (al-Hilli, 2017). Given its importance, this thesis focused specifically on the rituals of *ziyarat al-Arba'in*.

In addition, during the period when ISIS was advancing toward Baghdad, one cannot ignore the prominent role of the *marja'iyya* in countering their imminent threat. The severity of the threat, in fact, promoted the high-ranking Shi'a cleric, al-Sistani, to issue a *fatwa* or religious ruling urging Iraqis to fight ISIS, which immediately mobilised tens of thousands of Shi'a volunteers to form what has become known as *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* or Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in 2014. My thesis focused specifically on the role of the *marja'iyya* and *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* in using the commemoration of 'Ashura, especially *ziyarat al-Arba'in* during the struggle with ISIS.

1.6 Structure of this study

This thesis is comprised of eight chapters. After this introduction, in Chapter Two, relevant literature is surveyed to understand what ritual means in general for the purpose of choosing a suitable theoretical framework for this thesis. A brief introduction to ritual studies is presented and then ritual characteristics are provided. Subsequently, the discussion moves to underscore the impact of rituals on social relations. The discussion about rituals concludes in this chapter by exploring elements that contribute to their continuity.

After exploring rituals and discussing their features and their impact on social relations, a discussion of the theoretical framework of this thesis is presented in Chapter Three. Here, the focus is on SRT and the cultural theories of 'Ali al-Wardi. First, a discussion of SRT is provided, focusing on its four key components: strength of rituals, their strategic use, symbolic meanings of rituals, and the social outcomes of rituals. The discussion concludes with a critical examination of SRT, and potential contribution to SRT. The second part of this chapter introduces al-Wardi's approach to research and cultural theories focusing on the impact of two main cultural elements of Iraqi society: tribalism and religiosity. The discussion of the theoretical framework concludes with a critical examination of al-Wardi's theories.

In Chapter Four, relevant literature is surveyed to explore the impact of 'Ashura rituals in light of the SRT framework explored in the previous chapter. Accordingly, the discussion is presented in five sections: the dynamics of 'Ashura rituals, their strength, their strategic use, their symbolic meanings and the impact or social outcomes of these rituals. In terms of social outcomes, the discussions underscoring the prominence of 'Ashura rituals in creating changes within Iraqi

society are presented chronologically under three main time periods: pre-1921 (before the creation of Iraq as a political entity), from 1921 to 2003 (the duration of the Sunni hegemony), and post-2003 (the rise to power of the Shi‘a).

Whilst taking into consideration arguments presented in the previous chapters, the focus in Chapter Five is on designing a methodological approach that is suitable for this thesis. The discussion in this chapter commences by introducing the thesis approach, and then the rationale for using a qualitative approach is presented. After that, three main aspects of the research methodology are presented: firstly, the basis for data collection and analysis (triangulation); secondly, an explanation regarding the purposeful sampling of research participants where I introduced the research participants and discussed their selection criteria and recruitment strategies; and, finally, a critical reflection of my own (the researcher) views and background relevant to the thesis topic (reflexivity).

Following the discussion of methodology and research methods, the findings of the first stage of data collection and analysis are presented in Chapter Six. Such initial findings are based on two research methods: content analysis relating to the detailed progress of contemporary ‘Ashura rituals; and direct observation of *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* carried out in Karbala, Iraq in 2016. The resulting themes from both research methods will be presented in four categories: ‘Ashura rituals’ strength, their strategic use, symbolic meanings of the rituals, and the social outcome of the commemorating ‘Ashura.

Chapter Seven presents the rest of the findings, pertaining to the second and third stage of data collection and analysis, which are based on different qualitative research methods including interviews and a survey. In order to present such qualitative data in an organized manner, the discussions will follow the same order of research stages starting with the second stage of data analysis, then the third stage of data analysis and finally the chapter proceeds to discuss the final findings of this thesis. Given the nature of the methodology used in this thesis, the three stages of data analysis, where the analysis further develop with each passing stage, Chapter Six and Seven only presented the analysis and did not engage with relevant scholarship cited in previous chapters. It is in the following Chapter that findings of this thesis are interpreted and compared with the related literature.

Before the final chapter, the data generated by this research are discussed in Chapter Eight, with the aim of evaluating and interpreting the findings and comparing them with the related literature. Most importantly, the intention is to reflect on the findings from the theoretical view adopted in this thesis, SRT and the theories of al-Wardi. In addition, the challenges associated with exploring the main research question are presented after which limitations to the research and potential further research are discussed. Chapter Eight concludes by discussing recommendations for future research. The final chapter presents the conclusion of this thesis.

1.7 Chapter summary

In this chapter, the research topic, centred on exploring the impact of the mourning rituals of ‘Ashura practiced by Shi‘a Muslims on Shi‘a-Sunni relations, has been introduced, and the background of the battle of Karbala has been presented, followed by a coherent discussion regarding the formation of Shi‘a identity. The development of the mourning rituals has also been discussed, within historical and contemporary socio-political contexts. Throughout the discussion, there has been an emphasis on the defining year of 2003 because since then, Iraq has been confronted with dramatic changes, commencing with the toppling of the regime of Saddam Hussein and the subsequent end to the Sunni domination of power in Iraq. The contextualisation of ‘Ashura rituals within Shi‘a-Sunni discourse has been also discussed. This chapter concluded with a presentation of the structure of this thesis and a chapter summary.

2 Rituals and social dynamics

In Chapter Two, relevant literature is surveyed to understand what rituals mean in general. An early and contemporary understanding to ritual is presented. Whilst it used to be confined to religious contexts, ritual, from a contemporary point of view, is comfortably situated within the cultural domain (Knottnerus, 2012). Ritual characteristics are here provided, followed by a discussion of rituals within the Arabic context and culture. Subsequently, the discussion moves to underscore the impact of rituals on social relations. The discussion about rituals concludes in this chapter by exploring elements that contribute to their continuity, both in terms of their ceremonial features and also in terms of their enduring social impact.

An initial understanding of rituals interprets them as ordinary actions that are performed in a symbolic manner. Womack (2005, p. 90), for instance, notes that many professional baseball players tap the plate in precise sequences before batting. They believe this symbolic act aids their performances at bat. In a similar way, the same author (p. 90) notes that before every race, the automotive racer Jackie Stewart ritually removed his watch and entrusted it to the Captain of the racing team in a symbolic promise to return. Womack also explains that athletes practice before a contest because these activities work on a technical level, helping them to maintain their physical fitness; but that they perform rituals because they work on a symbolic level by helping them to achieve the psychological state necessary for competition.

In the same vein, many contemporary scholars in the field of sociology and psychology, including Kertzer (1988) and Knottnerus (2012), have come to define ritual as symbolic behaviour that is socially standardised and repetitive. Any action can be characterised as a ritual as long as it satisfies three conditions: it conveys meaning-symbolism; it is repetitive; and highly structured and has standardised sequences that are formal rather than spontaneous, that are often enacted at certain places and times, and which are themselves endowed with special symbolic meaning. Based on this basic definition, crying as an act may not qualify as a ritual, but crying for Imam Husayn and the tragedy of Karbala, for example, can be regarded as an element of the mourning rituals.

It should be noted that the literature on ritual is extensive and cannot all be discussed here. The focus of the chapter will be on the notion that ritual is no longer only identified within the context

of religion. Instead of thinking of ritual within religious contexts, rituals have been understood as cultural behaviour and thus assumed a central role in cultural studies, which have provided a plethora of enriching approaches to rituals. This is an important discussion because it paves the way for choosing a suitable theoretical framework for this doctoral thesis, which will be presented in Chapter Three.

2.1 Ritual in the literature

The notion of ritual first emerged as a scholarly concept in the nineteenth century, relating to practices associated with mystical beings and their power (Turner, 1967, p. 19). Prior to the Second World War, Western European and North American societies perceived ritual as an exemplary religious behaviour (having religious connotations) and was studied for the purpose of exploring the role of religion in society (Knottnerus, 2012). One of the earliest explorations of rituals was developed by Emile Durkheim, a founding figure of sociology, in his writings on 'The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life' (Durkheim, 1912). Durkheim's approach is mainly based on the analysis of religious practices of Australian Aborigines, through which he sought to explore the basic principles of religion and religious experience (Cariton-Ford, 2005; Olaveson, 2004). Durkheim was interested in the question of how religious beliefs and belief systems emerge and are reproduced within communities, and how they contribute to everyday systems of classification and categorisation, mainly with respect to distinguishing 'the profane' from 'the sacred'. Thus, the notion of ritual, seen as a religious practice, was used to increase the understanding of religion more generally, as well as its impact in Western societies. Durkheim's (1912) seminal writing on rituals has influenced scholars in this field; seldom has a piece of scholarly study on rituals been written without a reference to Durkheim's work. Whilst this does not suggest that scholars have not challenged his understanding of rituals, Durkheim's contribution to ritual studies cannot be overstated (Knottnerus, 2012). Durkheim has been credited as one of the few early scholars who recognised the crucial role of ritual in human lives (Bell, 1992; Knottnerus, 2012; Turner, 1967).

However, Durkheim's predominantly religious approach and understanding of ritual was challenged when religion lost its prominence in post-Second World War Western European and North American societies. Due to the notion of secularisation prevailing after the Second World War, ritual was no longer confined to religious contexts, but rather was comfortably situated within

the cultural domain and reinforced as both a central sociological concept and a crucial category of social life (Bell, 1992, p. 15). Accordingly, the focus of the analysis of rituals as part of social dynamics shifted from the religious to the cultural. Unsurprisingly with the emergence of cultural studies in the 1970s, interest in ritual has increased (Bell, 1992). Bell (1992) argues that the analysis of culture as opposed to religion *per se* gave a particularly critical place to ritual. This increase in attention, which continues today, is perhaps because the scope of culture is wider than the scope of religion since culture encompasses a wider number of variables such as language, belief, tradition and food, to name but a few. Unsurprisingly, this approach to ritual has contributed to the proliferation of ritual studies because of the variety of themes scholars wanted to explore in relation to this phenomenon. The prominence of ritual in the work of cultural anthropologists such as Victor Turner (1972, 1969, 1967), Clifford Geertz (1966), and Catherine Bell (1992), is a case in point.

Researchers' efforts to understand ritual in cultural contexts was exemplified by the seminal work of Victor Turner (1969). Turner provides an analytical framework that explains the psychological effect of rituals, which he presents as divided into three phases: firstly, separation from everyday activities involving a passage through a threshold state into a ritual world; secondly, a mimetic enactment of some dimension of the crisis that brought about the separation from daily life; and thirdly, a re-entry into everyday world (Turner, p. ix). These phases are explained in the following paragraphs.

The first phase, or separation phase, is the separation of participants from their social structures. The symbolic embodied practices of participants express their separation from their social structure, from certain social circumstances, or from both. This phase can be seen clearly during the preparation or early beginning of practicing rituals, when participants seek to prepare themselves spiritually and materially, either by wearing certain ritual costumes or by preparing their bodies or hearts to start separating from their usual reality.

The second phase, the margin phase, is a transitional phase where participants' social status becomes perplexing, ambiguous, and consequently marginalised. Ambiguity, the participants' prevailing state in this stage, occurs because of a passing through a cultural domain that lacks the stability of both the past and the future. The marginal phase sits between the prior status of the

participants and the one they expect to achieve after completing the ritual. Being a transitional phase, the participants express themselves using various rich symbols in order to be able to handle new variables that do not belong in their usual reality, which requires, in turn, similar treatment outside the familiar contexts.

The third phase, the re-aggregation or reincorporation phase, is a phase through which participants acquire particular rights and duties, which imposes on them certain ethical responsibilities toward others. The shift between the previous and the new statuses would be achieved after the completion of this stage.

Overall, then, Turner (1969) presents ritual as a process of leaving and eventually re-entering everyday time and social structure, a process which promotes a redefinition of the social status of its participants. Such structure applies to the practice of mourning rituals of 'Ashura, because they help the mourner to proceed through various stages that lead to separation from reality, then participation in a series of psychological and social processes, before reaching the stage of reorganisation in order to adapt to a new reality and free the individual from the barriers that had previously limited him/her (Jabar, 2010, p. 319-320). Rituals, and especially mourning rituals, according to Turner, provide new social situations through which participants may integrate with their new reality (Turner, 1969). Turner's three-stage analytical framework has been adopted by many scholars to highlight the psychological effects of practicing rituals (Harris, 2009; Jabar, 2010; Palmer, O'Kane, and Owens, 2009). In a way, Turner underscores the psychological benefits of practicing rituals, which in turn implicitly explains why people engage in ritual activities (Jabar, 2010).

Within a similar context of focusing on the notion of ritual while attempting to analyse it, Bell (1992) introduced a framework analysing the nature and function of ritual as '*ritual theory, ritual practice*', arguing that ritual is not thoughtless action stripped of context; rather an expression of symbolic meanings and thus constituting or representing an integral part of a wide range of beliefs and ideologies. It should be noted that Bell's framework was developed from her critical examination of previous contributions to ritual studies, from which she recognised that there had been two main approaches to the nature of ritual: either as an autonomous set of activities, or as an aspect of all human behaviour. To break free of the entrenched tendency to define ritual within

one or other of these two categories, she used the term 'ritualisation' to draw attention to the way in which certain social actions strategically distinguish themselves in relation to others. Within this context, Bell questioned some of Turner's postulates, arguing that "It is not easy to focus on how activity, in the very act, differentiates itself from other activities" (p. 9). In an effort to better understand ritual, Bell adopted an alternative approach named Practice Theory (Bourdieu, 1977). She (p. 81) argues that ritualisation, as a form of human activity, is distinguished on the basis of four features: situational; strategic; ambiguous; and reproducible (being able to reproduce or reconfigure a vision of power in the world). Her argument not only clarified the processes by which rituals differentiate themselves from daily life practices, but, it also emphasised the social function of the ritual, understanding it as "a culturally strategic way of acting in the world" (p. vii). Such understanding of ritual as a 'way of acting in the world 'opened the way for other scholars to think about how rituals impact others and it is, therefore, very relevant for this thesis.

Turner and Bell are obviously not the only two scholars who have enriched with their theories the field of ritual studies. Other scholars of particular significance are Clifford Geertz, Edmund Leach, and Marshall Sahlins (Grimes, 2013). Symbolic anthropologists such as Geertz analysed rituals as language-like codes to be interpreted independently as cultural systems (Kotnik, 2016, p. 30). In fact, Geertz (1973, p. 112) rejected functionalist arguments that ritual describes social order, arguing instead that ritual actively shapes that social order and imposes meaning on disordered experience.

Developing the insights on the function of rituals advanced by Bell, researchers have recently argued that rituals serve a variety of purposes, including cementing social bonds, displaying respect or submission, obtaining social acceptance or approval of a particular event, fulfilling religious and spirituals needs, and, sometimes, simply to providing enjoyment of the ritual itself (Bell, 1992; Knottnerus, 2012; Womack, 2005). In sum, it is common for people to engage in ritualised practices of different natures, such as political and religious rituals. This point emphasises the contemporary view that ritual is no longer only identified with religion. Knottnerus (2012, p. 3) argues that to restrict rituals to only sacred/religious contexts is to ignore the powerful and vibrant role that rituals play in much of our lives, and the ways in which they can meaningfully enrich our behaviour, our relations with others, and the social events in which we participate. Put

succinctly, Knottnerus (2012, p. 74) understands ritual as a fundamental aspect of human behaviour and a powerful catalyst of social dynamics, irrespective of cultural group membership or historical period.

2.2 Characteristics of rituals

Participants in ritual are aware that they are involved in something different from any other activities. They perceive, albeit tentatively, that there is something they can generally call ritual and that whenever or wherever it occurs it has certain distinctive features (Bell, 1992, p. 69; Knottnerus, 2012; Womack, 2005). There is a general understanding that ritual is a complex manifestation of human behaviour (Bell, 1992; Knottnerus, 2012; Womack, 2005). Whilst they seem to make sense for participants as they recognise their purpose and function, rituals could be seen as irrational acts for non-participants (Bell, 1992; Knottnerus, 2012; Womack, 2005). According to Grimes (2013, p. 204), "outsiders might see rituals as animal-like, crazy, aimless, demonic, drifting, or even ridiculous, whereas insiders experience them as flowing, a surge of animating energy that is sometimes foggy, a part of who they are, and a belief system". In order to provide a sufficient representation of ritual, its characteristics ought to be explored. Among them, and according to previous literature (Kertzer, 1988; Knottnerus, 2012; Womack, 2005), this study will focus on four main features of rituals: emotions, symbolism, public aspects, and religious characteristics.

2.2.1 Emotions

There is always a reference to emotion when scholars discuss rituals. For Chaniotis (2006, p. 211), rituals are emotionally loaded activities. Kertzer (1988) argues that successful ritual "presents a picture of the world that is so emotionally compelling that it is beyond debate" (p. 101). Knottnerus (2014), on his part, emphasises that emotions are central to a variety of rituals, including religious ceremonies, political rallies and protests, sporting events and commemorations and celebrations. His original understanding of rituals, which did not include a preeminent emotional dimension, has been recently revised in this light: "ritualised practices are action repertoire that is schema driven and emotion-laden" (Knottnerus, 2012, p. 9).

2.2.2 Symbolism in ritual

As in the case of emotions, the symbolic value of rituals has been highlighted by several scholars. Bell (1992, p. 31), for instance, notes that ritual is said to dramatize, enact, materialize, or perform a system of symbols. In the same vein, Kertzer (1988) argues that symbolism is the most important aspect of ritual, because it separates rituals from other human behaviours such as habits and customs. In the same vein, Kertzer (1988, p. 11) argues that symbols provide the core content of ritual, since symbols are the primary means by which we give meaning to the world around us. Symbols allow us to interpret what we see, and indeed what we are. In general terms, therefore, symbols can be related to images, words, or behaviours that have multiple levels of meanings (Womack, 2005, p.1). According to Kertzer (1988, p. 11), symbols share three important properties: condensation of meaning, multivocality and ambiguity. Condensation refers to the way in which individual symbols unify a rich diversity of meanings. When a variety of different meanings are attached to the same symbol, such phenomenon is referred to as multivocality (1988, p. 9). Given the complementary properties of condensation and multivocality, Kertzer (p. 11) argues it should hardly be surprising that ritual symbolism is often ambiguous, having no single precise meaning. Indeed, Kertzer (p.129) argues that symbols sometimes have different meanings even for the same person.

Adding to their inherent ambiguity of meaning, symbols are also related to complex processes of communication, by which humans express ideologies and beliefs, and to represent aspects of their specific cultures (Womack, 2005). Indeed, Kertzer (1988, p.11) notes that "symbols are not arcane ways of saying something that could be more precisely expressed in simple declarative form" (Kertzer, 1988, p.11). Emphasising this point, Womack (2005, p. 1) argues that symbols stand for concepts that are too complex to be stated directly in words. Both arguments suggest that symbolism in rituals signifies a complex and indirect mode of communication.

Rituals are not only used to express symbolism; they are also viewed as mechanisms to make symbols important. Kertzer (1988, p. 40) explains that symbols embody certain views of how the world is constructed and that by engaging people in standardised, often emotionally charged, social action, rituals make these symbols salient and promote attachment to them. For example, the ritual

of raising the flag symbolises pride, elevating the status of the nation (Kertzer, 1988). Here, the flag is not seen as simply a decorated cloth but symbolises power, honour and pride in a nation.

Overall, symbolism, which is ambiguous by nature, is often expressed or communicated through ritual. Accordingly, rituals themselves tend to be equivocal, complex and charged, which in turn can be seen as an element that would complicate their impact. All these characteristics will be explored later on within the context of ‘Ashura rituals.

2.2.3 Public aspects of ritual

The public features of ritual, that it is expressed and perceived in open view, is crucial to the understanding of its influence on societies. When scholars discuss ritual, they rightly tend to explore them in a collective rather than an individual setting or environment, implying that rituals tend to be practiced by more than one individual. Chaniotis (2006, p. 212) argues in the sense that one of the most visible forms of rituals is procession, a term that may be attributed to marches, parades, demonstrations or pilgrimages. Saint-Blancat and Cancellieri (2014, p. 9) explain that processions which occupy public space carry symbolic meanings expressed in flags, sounds, and colours and recent literature has pointed out the interplay between processions, their symbolic dimensions, and the public space in which they occur. For example, McDermott, Nic Craith and Strani (2016), have critically investigated how culture and identity politics are played out in processions in a city in Northern Ireland.

For Werbner (2002), once people have marched openly in a place, they have crossed an ontological barrier. Such ontological transition may be particularly relevant for minority groups (Soja, 1996), which often settle their presence and manage their visibility through processions and manifestations in a public space. In that process, according to Knottnerus (2012), visibly expressing symbolism is key to all processions. In the context of ‘Ashura rituals, Alibha (2018, p. 2) claims that processions are a normative means to commemorate and transmit the core values of the Shi‘a through the events of Karbala. Alibha adds that procession communicates with a wider public presentation during the Islamic month of Muharram, when the Shi‘a make an unmistakeable, conscious and public declaration of their presence.

However, being public is not a feature for all rituals. There are also private rituals, either because there are certain conditions that need to be met in order for the ritual to be observed, or because there are factors related to the restricted social environment in which they take place (al-Haidari, 2007; Kertzer, 1988). A relevant example would be the *majalis al-'Aza* (memorial services) held by Shi'a women during the commemoration of 'Ashura. In these *majalis*, men are not allowed to attend for religious and cultural reasons (al-Haidari, 2007).

2.2.4 Religious aspects of rituals

As mentioned earlier, rituals serve many purposes, being the fulfilment of religious obligations or ideals. It is not surprising, therefore, that they are often seen in the practices of many world religions (Spilka, 2005). What separates religious rituals from other type of rituals, Collins (2011, p. 3) argues, is the distinctive emotional experience, or distinctive symbolic contents, stressing themes such as control, power and change (Spilka, 2005, p. 368).

The pivotal role of ritual in religion has been noted by numerous researchers (Bloch, 1989; Bourguignon 1973, 1976; Collins, 2011; Kertzer, 1988; McCauley, 2001; Rappaport, 1999; Spilka, 2005; Turner, 1967, 1969). One of the main arguments presented is that religious practices, which are basically defined as forms of ritual, express a religious belief and a commitment to a religious group membership (Spilka, 2005, p. 365). Spilka (2005) argues that adherence to a set of religious beliefs often entails a host of ritual obligations and expected behavioural patterns. For example, adherents of traditional or *halachic* Judaism are expected to pray three times a day, display religious symbolism, donate a certain part of their income to charity, eat only kosher food, refrain from work one day a week and partake in dozens of other rituals each day. Although there may be physical or mental health benefits associated with some of these behaviours, there are also significant time, energy, and financial costs involved; costs that are unlikely to be paid by individuals who do not believe in the teachings of traditional Judaism. Religious rituals, therefore, operate as 'costly-to-fake' signals of commitment for group members. According to Sosis (2004, p. 169), individuals who are willing to pay the costs of performing religious rituals are signalling that they believe in the religious doctrine that gives meaning to the ritual and are therefore committed to the religious group. Put succinctly, practising rituals shows loyalty to the sect or religion (Sosis, 2004).

Central to the understanding of religious rituals, then, is the relationship between belief and ritual. Edward Shils (cited in Bell, 1992, p. 19) argues that ritual and belief are intertwined yet separable, since it is conceivable that one might accept beliefs but not the associated ritual activities. He concludes that logically, therefore, "beliefs could exist without rituals; rituals, however, could not exist without beliefs" (p.19). This infers that belief is essential, and ritual is perceived as a secondary act. Kertzer (1988), however, sustains the opposite view, and argues, in a given religion, ritual is more important than belief. His main argument rests on contradicting the perception stipulating that beliefs are primary whilst rituals merely give public expression to religious beliefs. In Kertzer's view, the reverse is the case: rituals are a more important part of religious life than belief itself (p. 67). He points out that in any religion, the focus and emphasis is always on practising rituals and not on beliefs because "beliefs are privately held and, in some sense, unknowable, whilst rituals provide public statement of group's position" (p. 67). Most importantly, as Kertzer (p. 67) points out, what is important in ritual is the common participation without requiring uniformity of belief.

2.2.4.1 Ritual in the Arabic context and culture

Rituals are widely practiced in the Arab and Muslim world. Whilst 'ritual' in the English language refers to both religious and non-religious practices, the Arabic language uses two different words to refer to these practices: *Sha'aer* and *Tuqoos*, respectively. According to Arab and Islamic scholars, the difference stems from the fact that religious rituals mentioned in the Quran are referred to as *Sha'aer* and most are obligatory in nature, that is they must be practiced (al-Abieath, 2017; al-Haidari, 2007). Al-Haidari (2007) argues that these *Sha'aer* are crucial in Islam, including prayer, fasting, and the pilgrimage to Mecca during the *hajj* period, which takes place annually between the 8th and the 12th of *Dhu al-Hijjah*, the last month of the Islamic calendar. He argues that *Sha'aer* tend to be strict in nature and not susceptible to interpretation (al-Haidari, 2007). However, not all religious rituals are obligatory in Islam. In addition to *Sha'aer*, voluntary religious rituals are also practised such as *Umrah*, which is visiting Mecca but not during the *hajj* period.

In contrast, *Tuqoos* are social rituals (al-Haidari, 2007) but for most Arab scholars, they still have religious connotations (al-Abieath, 2017; al-Haidari, 2007; al-Jeburi, 2016), and carry religious

symbols in order to keep social practices connected to the religious realm. Al-Haidari further argues that those *Tuqoos* practiced, for example, during weddings, funerals and male circumcision ceremonies, are open to interpretation and have the capacity to evolve more than *Sha'aer*. In combination with the *Sha'aer* religious rituals, the *Tuqoo*s cultural rituals play a vital role in forming the social structure of traditional societies. Most importantly, these rituals are entwined with politics, class, education and social elements (al-Haidari, 2007).

Overall, rituals are popular in Muslim dominated societies, where there is a general understanding about the nature of most religious and cultural rituals that do not normally generate controversies (al-Abieath, 2017; al-Jeburi, 2016). However, scholars agree that Muslims are divided when it comes to 'Ashura rituals (al-Haidari, 2007; Husain, 2018; Nakash, 1993). In contrast to the Shi'a, the majority of Sunnis do not regard them as *Sha'aer* (Husain, 2018). For them, the rationale is that there is no mention of them in the Quran nor by the Prophet, so they can only be *Tuqoos*, or non-religious and are therefore not obligatory (Husain, 2018). In fact, in Wahhabi doctrine, an extreme sect within Sunni Islam, the 'Ashura rituals are considered to be *bid'a*, invented practices which deviate from or contradict the Qur'anic teaching (Husain, 2018). For the Shi'a religious establishment, however, they are definable as *Sha'aer* because they were instructed to practice them by the Imams (al-Hilli, 2017; al-Wardi, 1969). According to the Shi'a beliefs, Imams are infallible and thus would not demand something that would contradict the teaching of the Quran or the practices of the Prophet (al-Hilli, 2017; al-Wardi, 1969; Shomali, 2003). Taking both sides of these arguments into consideration, this thesis approach does not classify 'Ashura rituals as solely religious rituals but as cultural rituals that have some religious connotations.

2.3 The impact of rituals on social relations

Surveying the relevant literature about the impact of rituals has been conducted as comprehensively as possible. As previously stated, the aim of examining rituals in this thesis and exploring their features is to understand their impact on society, particularly the ways in which they shape social relations between different groups and their roles in influencing social order. Three main categories emerge when it comes to the impact of rituals on group dynamics and social order: the promotion of solidarity, the maintenance or otherwise of the status quo and the contribution to conflict (Kertzer 1988; Knottnerus, 2012).

2.3.1 Rituals promote solidarity among participants

Rituals play a key role in producing and maintaining social solidarity among participants. The rationale for this is related to a sociological approach formulated by Durkheim and modified by Kertzer (1988, p. 61), which argues that "people are totally helpless if left by themselves". Thus, people need to form social relations with others. According to this theory, human nature is to form societies and these societies are held together by a feeling of solidarity among their members. Kertzer argues that this need for social communion can only be met through some common action such as ritualised practices (RSPs): "It is by uttering the same cry, pronouncing the same words, or performing the same gesture in regard to some object that they become and feel themselves to be in union" (p. 62). Within a given community, rituals also used to transmit stories from one generation to another contributing to forming a strong collective identity (Eder, 2009, p. 6).

Put succinctly, ritualised practices are as ancient as societies themselves, forming social order and reinforcing social harmony, which is seen as a fundamental aspect of building a society. However, Kertzer (1988, p. 69) argues that rituals can promote social solidarity without implying that people share the same values, or even the same interpretation of the ritual. Kertzer notes that there are numerous examples to illustrate this point: sport rituals, remembrance rituals, memorial rituals, and political rituals such as rallies and party conventions.

2.3.2 Rituals have the potential to maintain the status quo or change it

Discussions have also been found in the literature suggesting that rituals can contribute to maintaining the status quo or changing it. According to Kertzer (1988, p. 131), ritual can provide important safety valves for cultural or even political tensions, because it provides an opportunity for the oppressed to release pent-up frustrations and hostilities and by so doing, offering an outlet that ultimately helps to preserve the status quo. The ritual practised during the Festival of Love, which has been celebrated annually in the Indian village of Kinsman, is a case in point. In this Festival, rich, upper-caste men smile while their shins are beaten by low-caste women. Such rituals provide the powerless with an opportunity to switch places with the powerful, reversing the cultural norms that govern everyday social life (Pandian, 2001). In a similar way, Kertzer (2012) argues that political rituals such as protests and rallies can also be seen as venting mechanisms through which the oppressed are provided with the opportunity to challenge the powerful. This

line of argument is not novel, though; Weatherford (1981) made a similar point in her book *Tribes on the Hill,* in which she argues that "ritualism provides a safe outlet for expression of potential conflict, as well as a restrictive frame in which the potential anomie or entropy is under control" (p. 36).

However, it is not clear why oppressed people or those discriminated against would be placated by ritual actions that do not ultimately improve their lot. Kertzer (1988, p. 39) argues that the answer to this is perhaps of a psychological nature, noting that people often behave in one way because they see the alternative as having worse consequences for them. Another argument that might provide an explanation is that they have the capacity to reduce anxiety by temporarily empowering less- represented people. It is this reduction in anxiety, according to some scholars (al-Wardi, 1969; Jabar, 2010) that contributes to preserving the structural status quo. This argument cannot be generalised for all rituals but might be applicable in the case of religious rituals which have the promise of a reward in the hereafter.

Eder (1987, p. 5), however, argues that there is a much more fundamental aspect to ritual; it is also a mechanism for the reproduction of a social structure. Similarly, Kertzer (1988, p. 131) notes that far from simply creating stability, serving to divert hostile impulses in a harmless direction and thus contributing to the maintenance of the status quo, rituals can also change the status quo. An appropriate way to discover how ritual is employed in this fashion is to take some examples of revolutions and revolutionary regimes and examine the role that ritual has played. In Iran, for instance, 'Ashura rituals successfully contributed to the toppling of the Pahlavi regime in 1979. Hegland (1983) observed that in the period between 1963 and 1979, Muharram ceremonies, tribunes, orations, and dirges had adopted revolutionary and political overtones. 'Ashura was not only a historical lesson anymore, but the axis of mobilisation against the Pahlavi regime (Hegland, 1983). Kertzer also recognises the crucial role of these rituals in toppling the Shah of Iran Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, by pointing out that "revolutionary victory was precipitated by the performance of a powerful mass ritual, which was linked to the Islamic celebration of the martyrdom of [Husayn] at the hand of evil Yazid" (p. 168). Based on the above discussion, it seems that rituals can maintain the status quo or change it. This is not to suggest that there is a dichotomy

or misunderstanding of the role of rituals in society, but to entertain or accept the idea that the effects of rituals can be conflicting and utterly different.

2.3.3 Rituals contribute to conflict

If rituals generate and sustain solidarity and have the capacity to maintain the status quo or to change it, they can also contribute to conflict. The rationale for this is simply because rituals provide a platform for people to be united (Kertzer, 1988, p. 69). In the case of identity-based conflict it is this unity that leads to competition between different groups and eventually conflict. Both Kertzer (1988, p. 69) and Knottnerus (2012, p. 88) refer to the case of the Orange Order, a Protestant group in Northern Ireland, to illustrate that rituals often foster social divisiveness, arguing that Orange Order parades unite Protestants and celebrate their control of Northern Ireland, thereby antagonising the Catholic population and further polarising society rather than unifying it.

2.4 The continuity of rituals

This chapter will conclude the discussion of rituals by exploring the continuity of ritual, both because this puts the concepts discussed earlier in the chapter into perspective, and because the continuity of rituals is seen as an element that reinforces their social significance. Related literature surveyed shows that some ritualised practices have a limited life span whilst others have continued for a long time (Grimes, 2013; Knottnerus, 2012). Moreover, when rituals continue through generations, they establish a life of their own and become fundamental to the identity of a particular group (Grimes, 2013). The ‘Ashura rituals serve as a good example here as they have become a crucial part of Shi‘a identity (Nakash, 1994). Even before the commemoration of ‘Ashura, however, some other *Sha’aer* or religious rituals, such as *hajj*, had been practiced and continue to be practiced by Muslims. Similarly, rituals that date back centuries are not only limited to or associated with the religious practices of Islam; many Christian and Jewish rituals have been practiced for thousands of years and continue to the present day (Grimes, 2013). What contributes to their continuity may be their crucial role or function in fulfilling spiritual needs, but it can also be argued that people believe they will be rewarded when they practice them and punished if they abandon them (Grimes, 2013).

To show how enduring religious rituals are, Kertzer (2012, p. 46) argues that even the authoritative leaders of the Bolshevik revolution were not able to suppress the ritualised practices of Christmas. Kertzer argues that when the Bolsheviks came to power in Russia, 1917, they immediately tried to suppress the celebration of Christmas in keeping with their atheistic policy. However, the Soviet leaders soon recognised their error because the attempted suppression of ritual did nothing to solidify the new regime and only created popular resentment. Therefore, the Soviet authorities changed their approach and called on the state to sponsor the ritual while at the same time removing as much of the specifically Christian content as they could (Kertzer, 2012, p. 46). In a different time and circumstances the Ba'ath Party, after assuming power in 1968 in Iraq, faced a similar dilemma concerning the powerful rituals of 'Ashura (al-Haidari, 2006). They opted for a similar response to that of the early Soviet leaders, suppressing and banning the 'Ashura rituals. They subsequently faced similar resentment from the majority of Shi'a Iraqis (al-Haidari, 2006). However, unlike the Soviet leaders, the Ba'ath Party leaders did not reverse their policy, which, in the view of many scholars, severely impacted the relationships between the regime and the Shi'a of Iraq (Haddad, 2011; Husain, 2018; Nasr, 2016).

It could also be argued that the repetitiveness or continuity of religious rituals has more to do with human confidence than with their religious natures. Kertzer (2012, p. 11) argues that rituals help give meaning to the world, in part by linking the past to the present and the present to the future. This helps us to cope with two human problems: building confidence in our sense of self by providing us with a sense of continuity, and giving us confidence that the world in which we live today is the same world we lived in before and the same world we will have to cope with in the future. This could perhaps explain why some rituals have lasted for as long as the 'Ashura rituals, which started approximately 1400 years ago. In this particular case, it could be argued that ritualised practices are equally promoted by both psychological needs and social contexts. Kertzer (p. 39) explains that most people go along with the social arrangements into which they are born, for these generally appear to them as the only possible reality. Certainly, this could be the cause, but this does not mean that rituals are static in nature. Rituals change in form, in their symbolic meaning, and in their social effects. Depending upon circumstances, new rituals arise and old rituals fade away.

Overall, it is true that rituals can change, fade, or turn into tradition, but many scholars argue that they tend to be slower to change than many other aspects of human behaviour. This is because of the capacity of rituals to give people a sense of continuity, which is derived mainly from their 'constancy of form' over time (Zevin, 1990).

2.5 Chapter summary

In this chapter, the relevant literature has been surveyed to provide a general understanding of ritual and clarify its meaning. The discussion shows that in the contemporary relevant studies, rituals have been understood as part of 'culture' and not strictly 'religious' practices. Many scholars in the field of sociology and psychology understand ritual as symbolic behaviour that is socially standardised and repetitive, a definition that has been adopted in this study. Many scholars also recognise that there are many types of rituals but they all share two main elements: collectivity and emotions.

Ritual characteristics were also provided in this Chapter. It emerged that emotions and the public aspects of ritual are two main crucial features of ritual. Furthermore, the notion of symbolism in rituals has been emphasised simply because it separates rituals from other human behaviours such as habits and customs. The relevant literature has been explored to understand in which way(s) rituals impact society and shape social relations. Accordingly, three main relevant arguments were found and outlined in this chapter: rituals promote solidarity, they can maintain or change the status quo, and they can contribute to conflict. Finally, this chapter discussed the continuity of ritual and argued that that the longest practiced rituals are of religious nature. Overall, the critical discussion of ritual in Chapter Two provided a deeper understanding of ritual which will be used in the following chapter, where theoretical framework for this doctoral thesis is discussed, focusing on SRT and al-Wardi's cultural theories.

3 Theoretical Framework: Structural Ritualisation Theory and the contributions of ‘Ali al-Wardi

The discussion in this chapter, which has benefited from the arguments presented in the previous chapter, is dedicated to the theoretical framework adopted in this doctoral thesis. First, the rationale for adopting an empirical approach is presented. Then, reasons for choosing Structural Ritualisation Theory, SRT (Knottnerus, 1997, 2012) and complementing it with the theories and hypothesis of the Iraqi sociologist ‘Ali al-Wardi (2013 a and b, 1969, 1965) are provided. After that, a detailed account and critical examination of SRT is presented followed by discussions and examinations of al-Wardi’s theories.

3.1 Theoretical approach: Discussion of religious versus empirical approaches

The core concept of this research on Shi‘a practices and rituals in Iraq poses the challenge of finding the best-suited theoretical frameworks and approaches with which to explore the impact of ‘Ashura rituals on Shi‘a-Sunni relations in Iraq. This challenge is mainly derived from the fact that there are two very different theoretical approaches which can be used to explore the main research question: a religious approach from either a Shi‘a or Sunni perspective, or an empirical approach. The main difference between these two approaches relates to metaphysics (al-Wardi, 2013a and b). The former approach relies on evidence of a metaphysical nature (from the Quran, for example), whilst the latter depends on empirical evidence which can be probed. Applying these two theories in order to comprehend the impact of ‘Ashura rituals on Shi‘a-Sunni relations will yield two different sets of analyses.

From a Shi‘a or Sunni point of view or, in other words, from a religious point of view, the Shi‘a-Sunni dynamic is characterised by a constant struggle to represent the true Islam (al-Wardi, 1969; Marechal and Zemni, 2013). This struggle is rarely manifested in explicit agreements, but often in militant self-defence due to each sect’s differing theories based on metaphysical proof derived from different interpretations of the Quran (al-Wardi, 1969). The issue with this type of evidence is it tends to be non-negotiable, given that it comes from a higher power, thereby limiting the capacity for a pragmatic discussion of, for example, ‘Ashura rituals and analysis of Shi‘a-Sunni

dynamics. From a religious point of view, critically examining religious-related practices is not desirable (al-Wardi, 2013b, 1969).

The problems derived from applying Shi‘a and Sunni religious theories goes beyond their inability to allow for a pragmatic exploration of the objects of this thesis. Whilst both the Shi‘a and Sunni sects rely heavily on the Quran and the prophet *hadiths,* or quotations and teachings of the Prophet Mohammed to formulate their theories, they interpret these main sources differently. This difference in interpretation is evident in their narration of the Battle of Karbala in 680. In contrast to the Shi‘a, the Sunni have moved on when it comes to remembering the tragedy of Karbala citing that it is not in the interest of Muslims to dwell on a conflict that tore them apart (al-Wardi, 2013; Husain, 2018).

Influenced by the Karbala episode, Shi‘a and Sunni religious theories started to develop a narrative concerning ‘who is right and who is wrong’, largely affected by each side’s interpretation of this event focused on finding the ‘ultimate truth’ (al-Wardi, 1969). However, the aim of this research study is not to assess the legitimacy of Shi‘a and Sunni religious and cultural practices, but rather to explore the impact of the Shi‘a’s narrative of Karbala expressed through the rituals of ‘Ashura on Shi‘a-Sunni relations. It is for these reasons that neither Shi‘a nor Sunni theories are suitable for the exploration of the impact of ‘Ashura rituals on Shi‘a-Sunni dynamics. This does not deny the value of religious approaches and interpretation; in fact, they will be explored when relevant in order to better understand ‘Ashura rituals. In light of this, sociological and psychological theories based on empirical evidence will be utilised instead.

The benefit of adopting an empirical approach that relies on evidence rather than beliefs (knowledge that goes beyond human capacity to rationalise), relates to the examination and probing of evidence in order to explore a given phenomenon (al-Wardi, 1965). Since this research is concerned with human behaviour manifested in ritualised activities and social relationships, sociological and psychological theories will be adopted, in particular, Structural Ritualisation Theory, SRT (Knottnerus, 1997, 2012) and the theories and hypothesis of the Iraqi sociologist ‘Ali al-Wardi (2013 a and b, 1969, 1965). The latter have been included as a genuine contribution to the topic from Arab sources and as a potential ‘rectifier’ of the predominantly Western approach of SRT.

3.2 Empirical approach: The rationale for using SRT and al-Wardi's theories

The main arguments presented in this research are based on assumptions underlying the core concept of Structural Ritualization Theory (SRT) (Knottnerus, 2012). Knottnerus argues that, when used strategically, rituals can alter social relations between different groups and shape the power structures of society. Knottnerus (p. 7) uses an analytical framework employing the idea of ritual to explain various social experiences and group dynamics. In addition, SRT is one of the few theories that in addition to explicitly recognise the impact of rituals on social relations, it provides a solid framework where close attention is paid to ritual strength, the strategic use and the symbolic meanings of rituals, whilst also taking into consideration the power structure of society. In SRT, the higher the strength of rituals and the more strategically used, the greater the impact (Knottnerus, 2012, p. 36). For all the aforementioned reasons, the SRT was chose as a theoretical framework for this study.

Adopting the SRT as a theoretical framework, however, does not imply discrediting the scholarly work of rituals by prominent scholars discussed in the previous chapter, including but not limited to, Turner, Bell, Geertz, and Douglas. On the contrary, their scholarly work provided a solid base for understanding ritual in this thesis. Nevertheless, given the focus of their contributions is primarily on rituals themselves, their views have not featured prominently in this thesis. In SRT, however, ritual is utilised as an analytical category, a lens through which to explore social dynamics (Knottnerus, 2012), an aspect that precisely fits the nature of this research.

Underlying SRT arguments is the assumption that rituals have "great explanatory value. This perspective assumes that by attending to the role rituals play in social events we increase our capacity to explain and better understand human behaviour and social dynamics" (Knottnerus, 2012, p. 4). Within the domain of sociology and cultural studies, contemporary scholars have used this approach, ritual as an analytical category, to understand the complexity of human behaviours and social relations (Edwards, 2010; Kertzer, 1988; Knottnerus, 2012). Knottnerus (p. 3) argues that "rituals provide a link for sociological analysis and research and expands our understanding of how we are social creatures and why we behave the way we do". In a similar vein, Kertzer (1988, p.8) argues that "ritual is an analytical category that helps us deal with the chaos of human experience and put it into coherent framework".

In the larger domain of sociology, SRT positions itself at a distance from macro sociological approaches (such as functionalism and conflict theory) and closer to micro sociological approaches (such as symbolic interactionism), which address the social-psychological dynamics of individuals interacting in small groups (micro sociology). According to Harris (2003, p. 4), functional analysis proceeds not by examining the details of specific interactions but by looking at the society as a whole and determining how it maintains itself. Similar to functionalism theory in terms of macro approach to analysis, conflict theory adopts the metaphor-society as war-which means that the focus remains on society rather than on groups within a society. In contrast, SRT focuses decidedly on group dynamics.

It is also relevant to this discussion to note that SRT views rituals as cultural and not strictly religious practices, which is also aligned with this thesis' approach to ritual, as outlined in Chapter Two. Knottnerus (2012, p. 6) argues that SRT is directly relevant for understanding culture due to its central focus on rituals and the symbolic meanings expressed through them, as well as the roles rituals play in providing meaning, direction, and focus to social life and group interaction.

In addition to SRT which will be explored in greater details in section (3.2.1), the cultural theories of 'Ali al-Wardi (1913-1995) and his approach to the research of cultural and religious practices have also been adopted. Al-Wardi is widely regarded as the most distinguished and influential Iraqi sociologist (al-Haidari, 2006; al-Hashimi, 2013, Haddad, 2011). What is remarkable about al-Wardi's approach is that, as a researcher, he was able to critically tackle religious and cultural practices, which are often regarded as taboo in the Muslim world. Al-Wardi (1965) himself admitted that it would be offensive in a traditional society to adopt such an approach, particularly when the aim is to critically explore religious and cultural practices (such as Shi'a rituals), the role and influence of religious leaders and the impact of tribalism on society.

Adopting al-Wardi's theories is justifiable as SRT allows for the incorporation of other frameworks to accommodate for cultural elements of non-Western groups including, for example, Chinese and Indian groups (Guan and Knottnerus, 1999; Sen and Knottnerus, 2016). Knottnerus (2012) notes that "SRT creates different kinds of linkages with other perspectives and areas of study focused on various topics" (p. 6) and has developed links or bridges with "studies of ethnic communities and identity, disaster, social power, movements, and social inequality" (p. 6). Given

the multifaceted nature of this research topic in terms of tackling sectarian relations and religious beliefs, it is not surprising that a variety of theories may be better suited to the attempt to capture their complexity. It is, therefore, al-Wardi's theories of Iraqi society in general, and his methodological approach in particular, that will be adopted to further the theoretical framework in this research study.

Furthermore, there are strong reasons for selecting al-Wardi's analytical framework for use in this research study alongside SRT. Firstly, both approaches fit within the field of sociology and psychology. Secondly, both approaches use multimethod research strategies. Thirdly, and most importantly, al-Wardi's style is to adopt relevant Western-based theories and methodologies and adjust them to suit Iraqi culture for the exploration of Shi'a-Sunni dynamics in Iraq (al-Zurfi, 2014). Based on the aforementioned discussion, this research has employed and built upon the SRT and al-Wardi's theories of Iraqi society.

In the following sections, detailed discussions of SRT framework are presented followed by a critical examination of this theory. After that, detailed discussions of al-Wardi's theories are presented followed by critical examination of his theories.

3.2.1 SRT: General theory and analytical framework

SRT's argument that rituals have an impact on social relations is mainly derived from the assumption that rituals are predominantly public and therefore society is exposed to them, and that rituals are dynamic; they emerge from and can be transmitted to different levels of society. Knottnerus (2012, p. 28) argues that rituals can operate and spread within the micro and macro levels of social order (see Figure 2). Rituals can, therefore, move across different levels of social structure, which include: world system, societal, inter-organisational relations, intra-organisational relations, networks (social, political, or religious groups, for example), and relationships on a local level, such as friendships and interactions between neighbourhoods. Examples might involve some rituals spreading from the global/world system level to societal level in a particular country (macro to micro) or, on the other hand, spreading from a religious group to a societal level (micro to macro).

The spread of rituals within the same structural level of social order (community networks, for instance) is referred to as intra-level transmission. This involves a lateral type of ritual movement within the same level scheme. An illustration of this kind of transmission is the spread of rituals within a given workplace, a school, a particular religious group, or a political party.

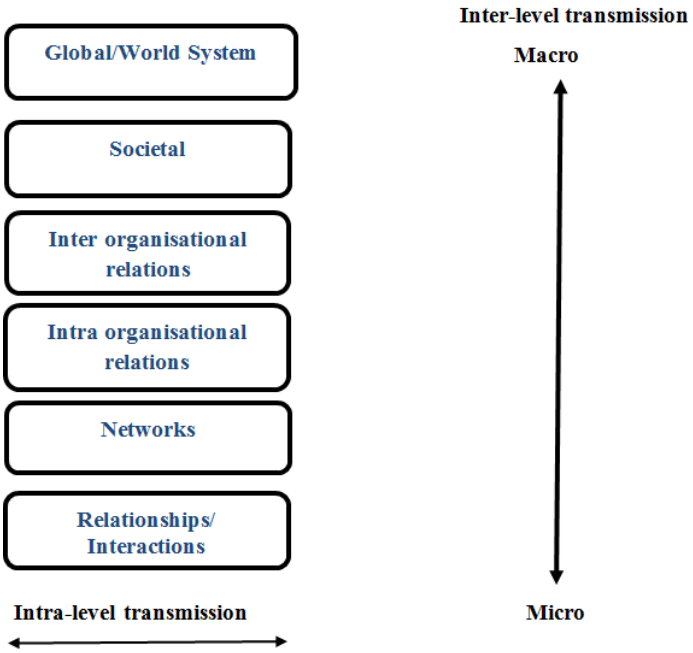


Figure 2 *Model for levels of social order and ritual dynamics (Knottnerus, 2012, p. 33)*

In SRT, rituals are public and dynamic and their impact depends on the strength of the ritualised practices and their strategic use: the higher the strength of rituals and the more strategically used, the greater the impact (Knottnerus, 2012, p. 36). Knottnerus also recognises that the impact of rituals depends on their symbolic meanings. Put succinctly, Knottnerus (2012) recognises that ritual has an impact on social relations. With this in mind, Knottnerus (p. 4) argues that SRT in no way denies the validity or significance of the impact of other social factors on social relations. On the contrary, Knottnerus explains "that whilst ritual is an essential dimension of social behaviour, it may both be influenced by these other dimensions of social reality and also profoundly impact them" (p. 4). Knottnerus' acknowledgment of other social factors is an important argument and very pertinent to this thesis. By exploring the impact of 'Ashura rituals on Shi'a -Sunni relations

in Iraq, this study does not refute or disregard other social, religious, and political forces on their relations.

Overall, given its plausibility, the SRT analytical perspective has been used by Knottnerus and other scholars to examine the impact of ritualised practices in different settings and contexts including Northern Ireland, Nazi Germany, and with the indigenous people in the US (Knottnerus, 2012). In almost all SRT research related studies, close attention has been paid to ritual strength, the strategic use and the symbolic meanings of rituals, whilst also taking into consideration the power structure of society. All of these four aspects are germane to the focus of this research and will be discussed in the following sections.

3.2.1.1 The strength of ritualised practices

Central to the previous understanding is the concept of ritualised practice, which refers to an "action repertoire that is schema driven" (Knottnerus, 1997), expressing symbolic themes and involving:

> Regularized [ritualised] and repetitious actions, which are grounded in actors' cognitive maps, or, to use another phrase, symbolic frameworks. These practices are found throughout social life and can include routinized [routinised] styles of interaction within offices or other organizational [organisational] milieus, prevalent types of relationships within subcultures, secret societies, or informal groups, typical behavioural patterns within civic, religious, or political settings (both ceremonial and non-ceremonial), and even stylized [stylised] bodily movements (p. 260-261).

Knottnerus (2012) argues, therefore, that the spread of ritualised practices both at intra-level and inter-level transmissions depends on their strength. In order to determine such strength or ranking of ritualised practices, four components are identified: salience, repetitiveness, homologous-ness and resources. These are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Salience refers to the "degree to which a ritualised symbolic practice within a domain of interaction is prominent, conspicuous, or noticeable" (Knottnerus, 1997, p. 262). The concept refers to the prominence of certain actions, or, to describe it somewhat differently, the degree to which an action is noticeable. For instance, certain actions may have a low degree of salience and therefore not be

conspicuous or at the centre of an interaction, and some actions possess a higher degree of salience than others.

Repetitiveness is the relative frequency with which ritualised practices are performed (Knottnerus, 1997, p. 262). In other words, the extent to which ritualised practices are repeated varies; the event may rarely occur or may occur often (Knottnerus, 1997). As for the third component, homologous-ness refers to the degree of perceived similarity in meaning and form among different ritualised practices (Knottnerus, 1997, p. 263). Different ritualised practices may exist in a domain, or several domains of interaction, and these practices may have a higher or lower degree of affinity between them. The more the coincidence between them, the greater the social outcome, both in actors and society at large.

As for the final element, resources refer to the materials needed to engage in ritualised practices which are available to actors (Knottnerus, 1997, p. 264). The more resources are readily available, the more likely ritualised symbolic practices will be undertaken by actors. Although cognitive representations, which refers to the three previous factors explored (salience, repetitiveness and homologous-ness) remain the key factor in the development and execution of ritualised practices, resources are essential to successfully achieve them. There are two major categories of resources; human, and non-human. Human resources refer to "abilities and characteristics of actors perceived by group members to be of value (or have utility) for themselves or the group" (Knottnerus, 1997, p. 265). On the other hand, non-human resources refer to "all that is not human that is perceived by group members to be of value (or have utility) for themselves or the group" (Knottnerus, 1997, p. 265). A cash donation as contribution to executing ritualised practices is a relevant example of non-human resources.

Exploring these four elements enables researchers to determine the overall importance or 'rank' of a ritualised practice (Knottnerus, 1997). Of particular interest to this thesis is a study conducted by Jennifer Edwards and David Knottnerus (2010) examining the ritualised practice of the Orange Order, a major political-religious group in Northern Ireland, on Protestant-Catholic dynamics. This study, which utilised SRT, is important for this discussion because of the similarities that can be drawn between the relative antagonistic nature of the Catholic-Protestant relationships in Northern Ireland and that of Shi'a-Sunni relationships in Iraq. In order to explore the impact of the ritualised

practices of the Orange Order, Edwards and Knottnerus (2010, p. 8) argue that it was crucial to determine the ritual's strength. Whilst applying the four theoretical components, they focused on the progress of rituals, emotions expressed by participants, and number of participants involved. After applying the four key theoretical components influencing the rank of ritualised practice, they found that although all Orange Parades possess a high degree of salience, the most prominent and central ritualised symbolic practice engaged in by members of the Orange Order is the Twelfth of July Parade. This parade possesses the highest degree of salience (Edwards and Knottnerus, 2010, p. 8). This is because the Twelfth of July is an official holiday in Northern Ireland, which contributes to its public and formal visibility.

Examining the strength of rituals is an important step for exploring the impact of rituals on the social structure of society, and relevant to the focus of this research. It is true that scholars, including al-Haidari (2007) and Nakash (1994), argue that 'Ashura rituals are powerful, but applying these four concepts to 'Ashura rituals might provide an analytical basis for this argument. Also, it is important to point out that no other theories of rituals provide such a rich and detailed framework for the examination of the strength of ritualised practices. Overall, because of the effectiveness of the four underpinning concepts detailed in this section, researchers have successfully adopted them to explore the impact of ritualised practices on 'others'. For example, Knottnerus (1999) used SRT to examine the role that ritualised practices play in the formation and reproduction of social actions, relations and structures focusing on two populations of first- and second-generation Chinese Americans. Also, Knottnerus and LoConto (2003) applied SRT to examine the ways in which members of an Italian American community in south-eastern Oklahoma strategically used social rituals strategically to achieve different outcomes including expressing their ethnicity, creating community ties, and enhancing personal gain and survival in the host society.

3.2.1.2 Strategic ritualisation

Together with the strength of ritualised practices, Knottnerus (2012) posits that rituals can be used strategically by powerful groups for their own interest. This is a crucial aspect when exploring the impact of rituals on social relations. Knottnerus recognises that rituals on their own have a potential for impact, but that the strategic use of rituals means that someone has seized this potential to

achieve certain goals. For Knottnerus (2012, p. 75), the strategic ritualisation refers to activities that are carried out in a calculating and deliberate manner. This theoretical approach is supported by Kertzer (1988), arguing that rituals themselves are the intentional manipulation of symbols to frame issues in a specific manner.

In that regard, Knottnerus (2012) draws a link between rituals' strategic use and social dominance, arguing that rituals are often directly connected to social decision-making and power. Put succinctly, Knottnerus (2012) argues that the impact of rituals increases when used strategically by powerful groups. For Knottnerus (2012), "the manipulation or the strategic use of rituals may achieve very different objectives, express different symbolic themes and meanings, and take very different forms" (p. 74). Building on this line of argument, the analytical framework of SRT argues that rituals are grounded in and shaped by groups who possess the power and organisational capacity to control how and why they are used and, therefore, to direct to some extent their social impact.

After making the argument that ritual, more often than not, is used strategically by the powerful to achieve certain goals, the focus of the discussion should be directed at identifying the 'powerful group' and clarifying the role of such a group in manipulating rituals. In that regards, Knottnerus (2012, p. 275) suggests that:

> Agents can strategically engage in ritualised practices and actively foster their reproduction or transformation of social structures for various purposes including self-aggrandizement [aggrandisement]. Such 'strategic ritualization [ritualisation],' in which actors utilize [utilise] or manipulate a system of ritualised practices in order to realize [realise] certain outcomes, can have profound consequences for members of society. This also attests to the fact that social rituals can be 'invented' or changed and can play an integral role in power and politics.

According to Knottnerus (2012, p. 75), there are several ways that ritualised symbolic practices may be manipulated to achieve a certain outcome, identifying three agents participating in strategic ritualisation. Firstly, there are 'ritual legitimators' or those who authorise or validate the ritualised practices associated with a specific group. Secondly, 'ritual sponsors' develop and promote ritualised practices associated with a specific group. Thirdly, 'ritual entrepreneurs' utilise ritualised practices to achieve economic goals. Edwards and Knottnerus (2011) add a fourth agent of

strategic ritualisation, that of the 'ritual enforcer'. According to Knottnerus (2012, p. 79), ritual enforcers are actors who use social power and/or positions of domination to directly influence or control the kinds of ritualised practices that are performed, in which participants are engaged and to which spectators are exposed. According to Knottnerus (2012), such power may be exercised in an overtly authoritarian and coercive fashion, or may be used in a more subtle and nuanced manner that is less visible for various reasons, ranging from economic gain to the desire for prestige, social honor, social identity and a sense of moral worth and acclaim. However, Knottnerus (2012, p. 79) argues that the desire for power itself, especially political power, is oftentimes the primary motive for individuals attempting to influence ritualised practices.

Drawing back on the previously mentioned study in Northern Ireland, given its relevancy to this thesis, Edwards and Knottnerus (2010) argue that these ritualised practices have been used strategically by the Orange Order. Knottnerus (2012, p. 93) describes the Orange Order in the following terms:

> The Orange Order, a major political-religious organisation in Northern Ireland, expresses its beliefs through the Twelfth of July Parades. Ritualised practices such as these that occur several thousand times each year have contributed to its being a dominant force in this society and a key player in what has seemed to be an irreconcilable conflict between Protestants and Catholics (Todd 1994). As a highly organised, hierarchically structured group with strong and effective leadership, ample resources … a long and proud heritage, and the capacity to mobilize [Sic] its membership, the Orange Order has successfully supported a program of RSPs [ritualised structural practices] aimed at achieving various objectives including the advancement of its political power and the collective identity and solidarity of group members.

Edwards and Knottnerus (2010) studied and examined documents and speeches produced by members of the Orange Order and delivered during the Orange Parade. They identify the Orange Order as a ritual legitimator, a ritual sponsor, and a ritual enforcer (Edwards and Knottnerus 2010, p. 16). Based on the examination of many studies using SRT, it should be noted that within the framework of SRT, the strategic use of rituals is not limited to powerful groups. However, the efficacy of rituals' impact increases when used strategically by powerful groups. Furthermore, it should be noted that throughout the SRT applications, attention is not equally directed at the four

agents identified by the SRT: the most explored agent is ritual enforcer whilst the least explored agent is ritual entrepreneur.

Overall, the concept of strategic rituals is relevant to this research study and thus will be used to examine the way ‘Ashura rituals have been used as strategic ritualisation by the *marja‘iyya* in Iraq and Iran, the Shi‘a-dominated government in Iraq and Shi‘a militias, in order to explore the implication(s) of such manipulations on Shi‘a-Sunni relations in Iraq. This approach is very much in line with the goals of SRT, applying its theoretical ideas of ritual dynamics and knowledge to understand social problems. What makes SRT even more appealing to utilise in this research is that as Knottnerus (2012, p.11) argues, theoretical ideas and concepts of SRT are substantiated and illustrated by empirical research where rituals play a crucial role within a majority-minority context.

3.2.1.3 Ritual symbolic meanings

Drawing on the SRT framework, it is crucial to explore a ritual’s symbolic meanings when examining its impact on social relations, given that, as noted in the previous chapter, symbolism in ritual reveals what is on peoples’ minds or “individuals’ cognitive maps” (Knottnerus, 2012, p.19). Knottnerus’ argument recognising the importance of symbolic meanings of rituals on social relations is in tune with the previously mentioned discussion by Baumann (1992) regarding the re-examination of Durkheim’s understanding of rituals in the context of a plural society. Baumann (1992) argues that rituals are used “to convey a message across cultural cleavages to ‘others’ or to an outside ‘public’ and that the message is concerned quite centrally with reformulating the cleavage between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (p. 98).

In order to explore the symbolic meanings of rituals, SRT recommends researchers to explore who is involved in the rituals and which groups are not, what rituals symbolise to participants both in terms of action and the language used, paying particular attention to customs, flags and banners that participants might use, and the symbolic meanings of the timing and location of rituals (Knottnerus, 2012). Furthermore, exploring the symbolic meanings of rituals necessitates examining the relevant materials including but not limited to speeches, documents and articles (Knottnerus, 2012). In addition, an overall knowledge of the socio-political context of a particular

society and how the society is structured is relevant to understanding a ritual's symbolism (Knottnerus, 2012).

Researchers utilising SRT have applied the concept of examining the symbolic meanings of rituals in their studies. For example, Edwards and Knottnerus (2010) did so in their paper examining the impact of ritualised practices of the Orange Order (Knottnerus, 2012). By examining speeches, customs, slogans, and banners, Edwards and Knottnerus (2010, p. 16) found four major themes articulating the symbolic meaning of the ritualised practices of the Orange Order: Protestant dominance, British loyalty, opposition and moral superiority. These themes, which have created tension in that society, were most clearly evident, according to Knottnerus (2012, p. 90), in the Twelfth of July parades in Belfast. Knottnerus (2012, p. 83) also applied SRT to examine the impact of the comprehensive rituals program used by Nazi Germany on society arguing that the Nazi rituals carried symbolic themes consistent with Nazi ideology; they celebrated the superiority of the community and expressed support and adulation for the leaders of the movement. According to Knottnerus, the aim was to communicate themes that emphasised the distinctive and superior worth of their groups whilst negating, degrading, and supporting the destruction of others, especially those considered most impure. Put succinctly, the aim was to change the culture of German society, and the symbolic themes expressed in Nazi rituals were aligned with this ideology.

It should be noted that the concept of using rituals to communicate complex messages by utilising symbolism has been long contested in Western culture, due to the conventional understanding of rituals as expression of premodern societies with limited explanatory value (Knottnerus, 2012). According to Hammer (2009), Western ideology understands people in modern societies, so-called developed countries, as rational actors (Hammer, 2009). They objectively and freely weigh their circumstances and decide on course of actions based on self-interest, leaving culture and traditions behind. Hammer (2009, p. 224) argues that these are direct cultures and that the strategies of these cultures focus attention on the specific words participants use when discussing particular issues. That is, direct cultures emphasise precise, explicit language to increase understanding of the issues or disagreements. However, according to Knottnerus (2012), within the framework of the SRT, rituals are found in both premodern and modern societies and have great analytical value, helping

us to explain the workings of society. Kertzer (1988) also believes that people still recognise how important symbolism is in modern Western societies. He argues that "though, we are rooted in the physical world and much affected by material forces, we perceive and evaluate them through our symbolic apparatus" (p. 12). Kertzer emphasises that the world still communicates through symbols, and one of the more important ways in which such symbolic understandings are communicated is through ritual. Douglas (2003, p. 78) notes that "it is impossible to have social relations without symbolic acts". As a follower of Emile Durkheim and a proponent of a structuralist approach, Douglas (2002) wanted to know why some societies are more ritualistic than others. In her Grid (regulation) and Group Cultural Theory (1970, 1966), she argues that societies with strong group or strong grid were marked by more ritual activity than those weak in either group or grid (Douglas, 2002, pp. 78-79). In this theory, the group dimension measures how much the lives of members of a group are controlled by the group (Douglas, 2007, p. 3). According to Douglas, the group dimension varies in strength from less to more control. Grid, on the other hand, gives a measure of structure. Some peoples live in a social environment where they are equally free of group pressure and of structural constraints. Similar to the group dimension, the grid dimension also varies from less to more regulations (Douglas, 2007, p. 3).

Overall, paying attention to symbolic meanings of rituals is an important step to understand rituals impact on social relations, both in pre-modern and post-modern societies and in Western and non-Western cultures, as the 'Ashura rituals will show.

3.2.1.4 Rituals impact on society: the social outcome

After presenting the different scales of social order from which rituals may emerge and also be spread to–via inter-level or intra-level transition, and after focusing on elements related to the strength of the rituals, their possible manipulation, and symbolic meanings, Knottnerus (2012) also pays attention to the specific dynamics of the societies in which rituals are performed. In particular, Knottnerus focuses on the forces of domination and repression which may be affected and to the forces of resistance challenging the prevailing status quo.

A key concept of SRT is using rituals as an analytical category to examine the complex dynamics of majority-minority, powerless-powerful relations, or dominated-dominant culture, which is generally characterised by intimidation and counter intimidation (Knottnerus, 2012; Seyranian,

2008, p. 31). In this complex dynamic, rituals play a pivotal role given that they are a means for expressing and communicating complex symbolic meaning. It is true that SRT has examined the impact of rituals practiced by less powerful groups such as the indigenous people of the United States, but its main focus has often been on more powerful groups such as the Nazi Germany and the Orange Order in Northern Ireland (Edwards and Knottnerus 2010, p. 1). In that regard, SRT frequently focuses on the ways rituals are used as tools by powerful groups to reshape society for their own interest. The idea is that the re-shaping of society occurs by spreading their influence through the strategic use of dominant rituals. Whilst in both cases, Nazi Germany and Northern Ireland, add value to the discussion of the theoretical framework, the ritualised practices of the Orange Parade is a more relevant case to the topic of this doctoral thesis to illustrate the impact of rituals on social relations given that both Northern Ireland and Iraqi societies, are divided into two major groups, Protestant-Catholic and Shi'a-Sunni, respectively.

As noted earlier, Edwards and Knottnerus (2010) have explored the social outcomes of the ritualised practices of the Orange Order on Northern Ireland society by using the theoretical framework of SRT. They examined rituals' strength, their strategic use, and the symbolic meanings of rituals. Edwards and Knottnerus (p. 18) argue that the Orange Order, a powerful organisation in Northern Ireland society, employs ritualised practices, mainly parades, to maintain Protestant and Unionist solidarity. By Protestant solidarity, they mean ethnic Protestantism as well as religious Protestantism. They contend that the two categories overlap. Based on their research, the Orange Order seeks to promote Protestantism as both a religion and culture. In addition, the organization seeks to uphold Unionism (Edwards and Knottnerus, p. 18). Edwards and Knottnerus argue that in addition to solidarity and group identity, the rituals demonstrate several themes such as intimidation, dominance, British loyalty, opposition to the nationalist community and moral superiority.

Edwards and Knottnerus note that focusing on processes of strategic ritualisation, shows that the Orange Order manipulates ritualised practices such as parades to achieve certain outcomes including dominance and power. They explain that the parades express distinct themes of dominance and control, and loyalty to the United Kingdom, given that they provide occasion for celebrating the memory of a three-hundred-year conflict between Protestants and Catholics in

which Protestants achieved a privileged political, social, and economic position relative to the Catholics. Although members of the Orange Order participate in numerous ritualised activities, such as church services, Knottnerus (2012) argues that the parades are more controversial and have more impact on Catholics. For this reason, Knottnerus argues that the Orange Order invests more time and resources on parades in comparison to other ritualised practices.

According to Knottnerus, in this complex society, gestures of dominance are expressed during the parades as the Orange Order marches through predominantly Catholic neighbourhoods. Knottnerus notes that Protestants normally march in Cookstown, a town with a Catholic population that has for years protested the marches. However, from the Orange Order perspective, their power is manifested through being free to march in the way it chooses. To demonstrate that they are power holders, Protestants have repeatedly declared that they will not be told when and where they can march. As Knottnerus rightly argues, this is not only a celebration of a historic event but also involves politics. Through the rituals of the parades, Protestants want to assert their political dominance. Based on their examination of the strength of the ritualised practices, their strategic use and symbolic meaning of rituals, Edwards and Knottnerus (2010, p. 16) identify the impact of the rituals on Catholic-Protestants relations, the social outcome, in terms of a strengthened collective identity, a heightened sense of moral worth, an elevated status of the group and increased power for the Protestants. They argue that the Orange Order has managed to create very effective, highly organised rituals that have become part of the Protestant identity in Northern Ireland. Acting as a rituals enforcer, the Orange Order has managed through ritualised practices, especially the parades, to assert power and maintain their dominance.

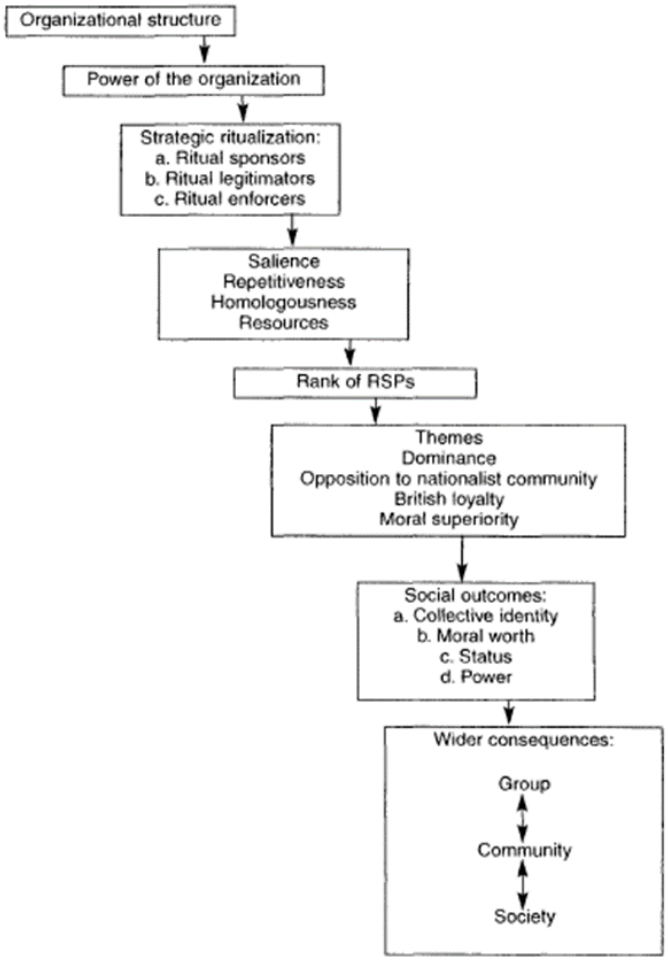
Overall, by utilising rituals as analytical categories to examine social relations, SRT has provided a missing link in sociological research and analysis (Knottnerus, 2012, p. 3). It has theorised that rituals have been used by powerful groups in different ways: to mark group boundary, emphasis group identity, express power or resistance. Given the efficacy of its theoretical framework, SRT has been applied to a number of studies concerning the impacts of rituals on social dynamics. Of particular interest to this doctoral thesis is the SRT application to the ritualised practices of the Orange Order and thus it has been utilised in this study. However, a major aspect underscoring the main concepts of this theory need to be further examined.

3.2.2 Critical examination of SRT

Despite being a prominent theory, there is a major issue that SRT has arguably failed to address, which refers to the extent to which rituals themselves and their participants are affected by the social effects of their ritualised practices. It seems that SRT's underpinning argument regarding the impact of rituals on society lies along the lines of linear thinking. Although it is rightly stated that societies can be restructured and relationships can be reshaped due to the impact of rituals, it fails to account for the impact of this restructuring on rituals themselves: does it enhance rituals, weaken them, make them more powerful, etc. In other words, the issue under discussion relates to how the social effects produced by rituals feedback into the ritual themselves and their participants. Perhaps the lack of considering the consequences of rituals impact is evident in the case of the Orange Order. As discussed earlier, the rituals of the Orange Parade practised by the Unionists have created tension and complicated Catholic-Protestant relations. However, the consequences of this tension on the rituals themselves have not been explored in this theory. This lack of consideration is evident in the figure presented by Edwards and Knottnerus (2010) in their study *The Orange Order: Parades, other Rituals, and Their Outcomes* (p. 16) (see Figure 3). In the diagram outlining their framework, the box in which the "wider consequences" are considered, at the bottom of the diagram, does not feedback into any of the categories of analysis previously stated: the strength of rituals, their strategic use, and symbolic meaning.

However, this does not render SRT entirely inadequate. Knottnerus (2012) acknowledges that this theory is relatively new and deals with complex social issues. Thus, it is expected that not all the dynamics of ritual have been equally explored. Notwithstanding the previous issues, this thesis takes Knottnerus' (2012, p. 11) approach to theory as a valid template for this study, as he argues that all of the work of SRT centres on three interrelated goals: the development of abstract theoretical ideas explaining rituals' dynamics; empirical research that substantiates and illustrates these abstract concepts; and applying this knowledge to alleviate social problems, social inequality and dehumanising social conditions. This thesis will therefore explore the impact of 'Ashura rituals on Shi'a-Sunni relations in Iraq by adopting SRT, and will attempt to shed light on the previously mentioned shortcomings, particularly highlighting feedback processes between social impacts and the rituals themselves.

Figure 1



*RSPs= Ritualised Practices

Figure 3 *A diagram outlining SRT framework* (*Source*; *Jennifer Edwards and David Knottnerus in their study The Orange Order: Parades, other Rituals, and Their Outcomes, p. 16)*

As noted earlier, the theoretical framework used in this doctoral thesis will not rely solely on SRT to explore ritual's impact on social relations because this theory has been mainly used in Western contexts. Thus, applying the SRT in more traditional societies such as Iraq, to examine the impact of 'Ashura rituals on Shi'a-Sunni relations, requires an understanding of the nature of Iraqi society. To amend this issue, al-Wardi's theories of Iraqi society, in general, and his analytical framework

of the nature of the Shi'a-Sunni relations in particular, will also be adopted as a theoretical framework in this research study.

3.3 Al-Wardi's cultural theories

There are two main reasons for choosing 'Ali al-Wardi's cultural theories in this thesis: as the founder of Iraqi sociology, he critically tackled the underlying cultural practices and beliefs which are often regarded as taboo subjects in Iraq (Al-Hashimi, 2013, p. 1), and al-Wardi's scholarly contributions provide a solid understanding to the fundamental cultural elements of Iraqi society prior to the upheaval of post-2003 civil war, terrorism and the rise of militias.

'Ali al-Wardi (1913-1995) is seen as a pioneer in analysing cultural aspects of Iraqi society (al-Haidari, 2006, p. 15; al-Zurfi, 2014). Al-Wardi (1969)[1] believed that a scholar is allowed to take advantage of all theories that benefit sociological developments in the world (al-Hashimi, 2013). Furthermore, al-Wardi's theories and methods of data collection were developed in the West- particularly in the US, where he obtained his PhD diploma- and then modified by himself in order to fit the nature of Iraqi culture (al-Wardi, 1969, p. 7), an approach that was adopted in this thesis. This theoretical shift has been defended by some scholars including sociologist Vivek Chibber (2014, p. 23), who have called for academics "to rethink the basic structure of Western theory" in postcolonial studies based on the claim "that the categories developed out of the European experience cannot possibly be adequate for analyzing the East".

Al-Wardi (1969) stressed three points throughout his research and writings: objectivity, pragmatism and neutrality. Although these aspects added credibility to his work, they also generated criticism (al-Haidari, 2006), particularly from religious and nationalist adherence to belief in the ethnic superiority and unity of the Arab nation. As noted earlier, the main reason for this was he critically tackled religious and cultural practices which are often regarded as taboo subjects in Iraq.

Throughout his work al-Wardi studied Iraqi society, critically analysing cultural elements that have hindered its development (al-Wardi, 2013b, p. 19). These elements are mainly related to tribalism

[1] The first volume of 'Social Glimpses of Modern Iraqi History' by al-Wardi was first published in 1969. The second edition of this book was published in 2005.

and religiosity, generally accepted as the two main traditional pillars of Iraqi society (al-Wardi, 2013b, p. 19). His theories came out at a time where the notion of Arab nationalism was at its peak (1950s-1960s), causing controversies with Arab nationalists, Shi'a religious leaders and conservatives who were proud of their tribal roots and religion[2]. According to Al-Haidari (2006, p. 272), given al-Wardi's bold approach to religious practices and beliefs, his critics accused him of blasphemy.

Al-Wardi (1969, p. 4) is a firm believer that today's events are linked to the past and therefore he examines historical events to explore the underlying elements of tribalism and religiosity and in which context they become more relevant. He argues that under the rule of the Ottoman Empire (1534-1918), Iraqi society suffered from the absence of decent and legitimate governing institutions. He (2005, p. 20) viewed the Ottoman governors, ruling in the name of Islam, as tax collectors only. Their lack of interest in developing the three main provinces (Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra) which came to form Iraq in 1921, contributed to corruption and lawlessness. Al-Wardi (2005, p. 20) theorises that it is in this socio-political environment, characterised by illiteracy, and a lack of security, tribalism and religiosity thrive. Put succinctly, in the absence of an overarching justice system that provided protection and satisfied peoples' needs, Iraqi society naturally relied on their traditional tribes and sects for protection and to manage their affairs, which in turn contributed to dividing society into smaller entities. Whilst it helps people to cope with hard conditions in light of the absence of more inclusive institutions, divisions on the basis of tribal and sect affiliations creates complex dynamics.

3.3.1 Tribalism

In al-Wardi's' (2005) views, the issue with a tribal society is that it rejects both non-conformity and individuality, and does not admit or recognise opposition. A tribal society is, therefore, generally averse to compromise, and this uncompromising ethos is largely due to two main cultural aspects, *al-asabiya* or solidarity and intolerance against another's beliefs or practices, and *al-methaliya* or idealism. In al-Wardi's view, these two main underlying and intertwined

[2] Most relevant scholarly work are: A Study into the Nature of Iraqi Society (1965); A Study of the sociology of Islam (2013); The Sultans' Preachers, 2nd ed., (2013); Social Glimpses of Modern Iraqi History, six volumes (1969).

characteristics associated with Bedouin culture have contributed to political instability, corruption and sectarian tension in modern Iraq. He explains that the location of Iraq on the borders of the desert attracted 'Bedouin waves' or invasions that have continuously challenged the country and its urban social norms. When tribes started to settle in Iraq's urban areas, particularly in the 1800s, great numbers of them migrated from Al-Jazeera al-Arabiya, which is current day Saudi Arabia, the traditional concept of the *al-asabiya* and *al-methaliya* came with them. It is for this reason that al-Wardi (1965, p. 379) asserts that Iraq can never shed its Bedouin and pre-Islamic values, such as *al-asybiya*, because they have become part of its identity over two centuries.

Al-asabiya is both a main building block of the Bedouin social structure and a survival technique. It is a feeling that unites tribe members, obliges them to glorify their own beliefs and practices whilst rejecting others. Al-Wardi (2005, p. 19) argues that *al-asabiya* developed in the desert from where the Bedouin originated. Given the nature of their environment, in terms of the scarcely available resources, these tribes are opportunistic in nature, seldom get along and invade each other to control resources (al-Wardi, 1965, p. 53).

In its traditional form, a tribe, even whilst living in urban areas, rejects non-conformity and individuality and does not recognise opposition or allow for compromise. Members of a tribe tend to be opinionated, quick to react and easily enraged (al-Wardi, 1965, p. 67). Thus, they could easily engage in violent acts or wars. All of these aspects are related to their environment, the biggest desert in the planet, which is located within the Arab world and where they have lived for thousands of years in terms of the scarcely available resources.

Traditionally, in order for a tribe to survive, its members have to adhere to the notion of *al-asabiya* (al-Wardi, 1965, p. 56). This is how the concept developed. *Al-asabiya* has become a central concept in Bedouin tribes; the result of the bonds between individuals due to shared lineage, family relations, and/or a cause. This notion is represented in the values of mutual support, solidarity, mutual defence, excessiveness in appreciating one's own action, values and beliefs. This is evidenced by the common Arab adage "me and my brother against my cousin, and me and my cousin against the stranger" (al-Wardi, 2005, p. 24).

In relation to *al-methaliya*, al-Wardi (1969) argues that Bedouins tend to characterise their actions and beliefs as idealistic. He explains that within the Bedouin culture, tribe members demonstrate support for their values, tradition, and cause, in order for them to survive, and this leads to the exaggeration of the quality and the nature of these values, practices and traditions. In other words, doubts or even the examination of these values, practices and traditions is unacceptable, even prohibited and/or unnatural for Bedouins because this would weaken the spirit and morality of tribe members. Thus, there is a tendency among tribes to claim that their values, practices and tradition are *methaly* or ideals. Because of this, al-Wardi (1965, pp. 24-81) argues, the Bedouins are stuck in the past due to their inability to cultivate other views.

In a broader context, al-Wardi (2013a, p. 284) explains that each society has its own rules and values, which greatly affect and shape individual's own identity and worldview. However, he (p. 284) argues that this impact is more complicated and complex in Iraq given that Iraqi society has two sets of values that can be subsumed under two main themes: *al-methaliya*, or idealism, which is admired and respected by Iraqis, and *al-waqieya*, or realism, which is adhered and followed in daily practice. Whilst the latter adopts behaviour or thought based on a perception of things as they are, idealism entails a behaviour or thought based on a perception of things as they as they should be, and, as such, it is the more pertinent concept for this study.

Al-Wardi (2013a, p. 64) also analyses Sunni-Shi'a dynamics in Iraq on the basis of *al-waqiaya*, represented by the Sunni, and *al-methaliya*, represented by the Shi'a. In al-Wardi's view, Islam is a socio-political governing system and in order for this system to function, compromises have to be made. He (p. 64) argues that the Sunni have adopted this approach, accepting that rulers of the Muslim *umma* should use all it takes to make them prosper. Indeed, that was the main narrative during the Muslim conquests (622-750). In contrast, al-Wardi views the Shi'a as idealists; they do not accept anything but the ruling of infallible Imams and thus criticise caliphs for abusing their powers and not following the true tenets of Islam. From al-Wardi's view, the Shi'a advocate *al-methaliya* because they have been oppressed through history. Therefore, they tend to criticise the Sunni for altering the true Islamic principles (al-Wardi, 2013a, p. 67). In fact, al-Wardi (p. 66), depicts the Shi'a, in today's terminology, as an opposition party, as they are traditionally critical of the ruling party.

Overall, through the combination of the concepts of *al-asabiya* and *al-methaliya*, many aspects of Iraqi society can be explained. Based on this combination, al-Wardi argues that Iraqi individuals are not prone to discussing what are perceived to be undesirable aspects or weaknesses about themselves. Moreover, because of the inherent element of *al-methaliya*, Iraqis are generally reluctant to acknowledge their weaknesses and rather blame foreign entities for their misfortune (al-Wardi, 2013a and b, 1965).

3.3.2 Religiosity

Al-Wardi (2013b) argues that, similar to tribalism, religiosity is problematic in Iraq for three main reasons: it is used by religious leaders as means to control the masses, it does not correlate with morality, and contributes to increased sectarian sensitivities between the Shi'a and the Sunni. Al-Wardi notes that religious practices and beliefs have been always strong in Iraq because, since the beginning of Islam up until 1921, the areas that formed the current Iraqi state were always governed by religious authority. The first secular government was only established after the British invaded and occupied Iraq in 1921. Al-Wardi was critical of the way the religious authorities managed Muslims affairs; people were generally neglected, he argues. In his view, religious leaders played a crucial role in maintaining the authority of corrupt Muslim rulers using religion as a means to control people by blaming them for their misfortune and seldom criticising authority (al-Wardi, 2013b, p. 11).

Furthermore, al-Wardi (1965, p. 223) argues that, whilst it is true that religious principles do not change, peoples' interpretations of these principles change over time because of societal changes and developments. In addition, there is a natural tendency among people to pick and choose the religious principles which suit them (al-Wardi, p. 223). Therefore, religious practices become more about people's need and less about adhering to the true principles and morality of religion. For example, in al-Wardi's view, 'Ashura rituals have become more about intercession from Imam Husayn, as a quick gain or reward, rather than a means of continuing his revolution. By commemorating 'Ashura, the Shi'a strongly believe that the Imam will intercede on their behalf to fulfil their material needs in this life and to forgive their sins in the hereafter (al-Wardi, 1969). Al-Wardi (1969, p. 32) argues that the issue with intercession concerns the moral values of society, as it gives leeway to people to maintain their wrongdoings. He also advances that the concept of

intercession constitutes a core element in Shi‘a ideology, because of the perception that Imams have the power to intercede on behalf of their followers, the Shi‘a. Al-Wardi adds that this concept is mainly restricted to the Shi‘a, as the Sunni do not believe in the *Imamah*, the authority of the Imams. Overall, in the absence of other reliable methods, al-Wardi (1969, p. 16) believes that the notion of intercession satisfies people psychologically. In that regard, al-Wardi (2013b, p. 255) notes that every year, as part of their rituals, tens of thousands of Shi‘a go to visit the Shrine of Husayn in Karbala but they learn nothing, they just weep and practice *latum*. Overall, in al-Wardi's (2005, p. 306) view, which reflected the transition period for Iraq from the Ottoman Empire to the creation of Iraq as nation-state in 1921, ‘Ashura rituals became more cultural than religious practices, symbolising backwardness, practiced mainly by the ill-informed and mostly flourish during periods of weak governance and corruption.

Essentially, when it comes to religiosity in Iraq, and within the realm of public discourse, extreme religious principles are admired and followed but selectively applied, which in al-Wardi's (2013b, p.15) view, it is due to the intransigence and dominance of such idealistic religious views. Al-Wardi (p. 8) argues that the dominance of religious views and traditions prevents people from expressing themselves. Therefore, words are more often used to meet social or situational expectations and less to communicate what each party actually believes or wants (al-Wardi, 2013b). In this case, more often than not, people rely more on symbols to express their views (al-Wardi, 1969).

Al-Wardi (2013b, p. 260) also draws a direct link between religiosity and sectarian tension, saying that the increase in religiosity leads to an increase in sectarian tension. He argues that, in a more homogeneous society, an increase in religiosity does not necessarily lead to sectarian tension. In Iraq, due to the existence of Shi‘a and Sunni communities, the increase in religiosity may well correlate with the increase in Shi‘a and Sunni religious practices. Since some of these practices, such as the commemoration of ‘Ashura, are incompatible with mainstream Sunni thought, it would seem highly likely that tensions between the two groups could increase.

In addition to his extensive knowledge of cultural dynamics of Iraqi society, al-Wardi's analysis is considered in this thesis because it reflects the period of relative normality of Iraqi society which preceded the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, Iraq-Iran war (1980-1988), sanctions imposed on

(1990s), the United States-led invasion (2003), civil war between the Shi'a and the Sunni (2006-2007) and terrorist attacks and militia brutalities (post-2003). Here, it is pertinent to note that the publication date of scholarly books or articles of relevant researchers is a factor that is considered in this thesis. With as much consistency as possible, this thesis took the approach of mainly relying on the scholarly work particularly interested in pre-2003 Shi'a-Sunni dynamics such as al-Wardi (1969, 1965) and Nakash (1994, 1993), which has been conducted pre-2003, and caution against the scholarly work produced post-2003 such as the work of Abbas Kadhim (2012) on the 1920 revolution. The researchers in this case could be influenced by the antagonistic nature of Shi'a-Sunni relations of post-2003 and thus past events could be reconstructed and presented to account for the current reality i.e., interpreting the past through the present.

As noted earlier, given al-Wardi's bold and objective approach, the circumstances related to the rise of an authoritarian rule of the Ba'ath Party in 1970s and the fear of persecution ended his scholarly contribution (al-Haidari, 2006, p. 35). Al-Haidari also notes that even discussing and endorsing al-Wardi's theories publically was regarded by the regime as unpatriotic act. Although al-Wardi passed away in 1995, his theories regained currency after the fall of the Ba'ath Party in 2003. Due to his strong analytical skills and pragmatic approach, al-Wardi's works have become an important reference point for those who are trying to understand the complexity of Iraqi society (al-Haidari, 2006). Some of his books have been translated into different languages including English, German, Spanish, Polish, and Persian (al-Hashimi, 2017, p. 1).

Adopting al-Wardi's theories after the fall of Baghdad in 2003 is evident in the murder case of Abdual Majid al-Khoei (1962-2003), the son of Abul-Qassim al-Khoei (1899-1992), an Iraqi influential and leading *marja'*. In an attempt to understand the circumstances that led to the killing of his father, Hayder al-Khoei (2010) not only studied but translated one of the al-Wardi's books, 'Social Glimpses of Modern Iraqi History'. Given al-Wardi's analytical view about the nature of the Iraqi society, al-Khoei (2010) explains that, "the only reason why I decided to read his writing is to get a better understanding of my people [Iraqis] and the only reason why I decided to translate was because I wanted other people to understand us [Iraqis]" (p. xvi).

3.3.3 Critical examination of al-Wardi's theories

Despite the prominence of al-Wardi's theories and analysis, it cannot be only used to understand the complexity of Iraq society, especially in the aftermath of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Inevitably since al-Wardi scholarly contribution ended, he did not incorporate the impact of recent developments in Iraqi history, including the implications of Ba'ath rule, the rise of Iran as a Shi'a power in 1979, and the US-led invasion in 2003 on the two fundamental cultural traits of Iraqi society, tribalism and religiosity. For example, with the development of improved education in Iraq and the subsequent decline of religiosity in the 1960s, al-Wardi (1965, p. 237) argued that the Shi'a would eventually lose interest in the commemoration of 'Ashura, an argument that now seems inaccurate given that the annual commemoration has emerged as the biggest cultural and religious event in Iraq post-2003. Based on the same notion of declining religiosity, al-Wardi (2013b, p. 261) also argued that sectarian tension between the Shi'a and the Sunni would eventually dimmish. However, the atrocities committed by both sects during the civil war between them (2006-2007) is a sold proof on the fallacy of al-Wardi's argument. Therefore, from the period when basically al-Wardi's scholarly contributions ended, I mainly relied in this thesis on the contributions of other well-known scholars who focus on socio-political dynamics of Iraqi society whilst paying attention to Shi'a-Sunni relations in Iraq including but not limited to, Faleh A. Jabar (2010), Fanar Haddad (2020, 2016, 2014, 2013, 2011), Renad Mansour (2017), Vali Nasr (2016), Yitzhak Nakash (2005, 1994, 1993).

In addition, even though al-Wardi's tackling of cultural practices perceived as taboo topics has been applauded in the scholarly community, al-Wardi, arguably, dismisses the intricacies and implications of the commemoration of 'Ashura, describing them as shameful and backward traditions developed in order to aid the Shi'a in coping with dire circumstances. This is because al-Wardi arguably failed to utilise a theoretical framework that would allow him to fully explore the impact of the commemoration of 'Ashura on Iraqi society. Perhaps, al-Wardi (2005) views on the commemoration of 'Ashura is based on the notion that rituals are found far more often in pre-modern societies. The following quote by al-Wardi (2005, p. 307) captures his view on the mourning processions of 'Ashura:

> During the Ottoman era, which was characterised by corruption and lack of education, mourning processions of Muharram were suitable for people's mentality

> and in harmony with their social norms. However, when modernisation arrived [post-1921], and education became the norm, these processions were still preformed. Some of them even became more prominent. The tremendous increase of participants in these processions, inharmoniously with the spirit of the modernisation, has negatively affected the individual and the society as a whole.

Knottnerus (2012) underlines the misunderstanding of considering rituals as predominantly found in pre-modern societies, arguing that such approach limits the use of rituals as an analytical category in sociology. For Knottnerus (2012, p. 1), as argued in the SRT, rituals are found in both premodern and modern societies and have great analytical value in helping us to understand the workings of society. Therefore, using SRT and the cultural theories of al-Wardi has benefited this thesis, because they complemented each other.

3.4 Chapter summary

In this Chapter, detailed discussion of the theoretical framework adopted in this thesis was presented. The discussion started with providing a rational for adopting an empirical approach arguing that, unlike religious theories, this approach relies on evidence of an empirical nature which can be critically explored. In that regard, this thesis found that the combination of SRT and the theories and hypothesis of the Iraqi sociologist, ‘Ali al-Wardi, are the most suitable and fit the purpose of this thesis in exploring the impact of ‘Ashura rituals on Shi‘a-Sunni relations. SRT was adopted firstly, because it focuses on the social dimension of rituals and secondly, because, in doing so, it adopts a micro sociological approach to the exploration of the interaction between social agents (symbolic interactionism). This is more appropriate for this study than other sociological models, such as functionalism or conflict theory, which are based on macro sociological analysis. According to SRT, the impact of the rituals depends on these three aspects: the strength of the rituals, their strategic use, and the symbolic meanings they express. According to this theory, the higher the strength of rituals and the more strategically they are used, the greater is the impact. This discussion concluded with a critical examination of SRT.

Given that SRT has not been applied within the context of Arab culture such as in Iraq, a conservative society in which the critical examination of religious and cultural practices is regarded as a taboo, the approach of Iraqi sociologist al-Wardi’s, to tackling these practices and his cultural theories and analysis of Iraqi society has also been adopted. His approach to research

was introduced followed by a detailed discussion of cultural theories related to the analysis of Shi‘a and Sunni Iraqis, whilst focusing on the impact of two main cultural elements of Shi‘a and Sunni Iraq: tribalism and religiosity. Chapter Three concluded with a critical examination of al-Wardi’s theories. In the next Chapter, the related literature will be surveyed from the perspective of the theoretical approach adopted in this thesis to understand the complex nature of ‘Ashura rituals and their impact on Shi‘a-Sunni relations in Iraq.

4 ‘Ashura rituals and Shi‘a-Sunni relations

The aim of this chapter is to survey the related literature from the perspective of the theoretical approach adopted in this thesis to understand the complex nature of ‘Ashura rituals and their impact on Shi‘a-Sunni relations in Iraq. As per the theoretical framework of this thesis, the order of discussion in this chapter will follow the previously outlined elements of the SRT, focusing on the dynamic nature of ‘Ashura rituals, their strength, their strategic use, their symbolic meanings, and social outcomes of commemorating the killing of Husayn in Karbala. Within the social outcomes context, and given the significance of the years 1921 (the creation of Iraq as a political entity) and 2003 (the removal of Sunni dominance and the rise of Shi‘a power), the discussion is presented chronologically under three main time periods: pre-1921, from 1921 to 2003, and post-2003.

4.1 ‘Ashura ritual dynamics

Knottnerus (2012, p. 34) argues that for rituals to be transmitted, there has to be some exposure or interaction among people who are observing and practicing the rituals, which can involve the replication or modification of rituals. At the level of relationships and social interaction, the spread of rituals may involve small informal groups influencing the ritual’s dynamics and also the social arrangements of other groups, whether those involve peers, friends, neighbourhood groups and so on (Knottnerus, 2012). Within the context of the spread of rituals, Nakash (1993, p. 163) argues that the oldest vehicle for creating and transmitting the memory of Karbala was the memorial services in which the Shi‘a narrated in Arabic the episode connected with the battle, and lamented the death of Husayn and his companions. These memorial services, Nakash notes, began immediately following Husayn’s death in 680, and were observed not only by his womenfolk but also in secret ceremonies in the homes of the Imams and their followers. This secrecy, as noted earlier, was a result of the hostility of the Umayyad Caliphs, which extended, among other issues, to the legitimate successor of the Prophet Muhammad. They imposed restrictions on the commemorations and, consequently, memorial services were contained. However, as Nakash (p. 136) argues, it was still a crucial period for the spreading of ‘Ashura rituals given that the tradition of the commemoration of ‘Ashura was established in that period.

After the fall of the Umayyad *caliphate* and the rise of the Abbasid *caliphate* in 1258, memorial services were no longer confined to private houses, and began to be held publically in mosques (al-Haidari, 2007; al-Wardi, 1965; Nakash, 1993). Nakash (1993) argues that as a way to appease the Shi'a for their support to end the rule of the Umayyad *caliphate*, earlier Abbasid caliphs allowed them to commemorate 'Ashura. According to Nakash (1993), by the tenth century, there were already designated public gathering places called *husseiniyah* built especially for these observances in Baghdad (Iraq), Aleppo (Syria) and Cairo (Egypt). The more relaxed policies during the Abbasid *caliphate*, therefore, helped the transmission of memorial services at a societal or community level (inter-level transmission) and also among different communities (intra-level transmission). Knottnerus (2012, p. 36) notes that intra-level and inter-level transmission of rituals can occur in conjunction with each other, sometimes simultaneously. In addition, given the relative freedom to practice them, whilst the memorial services were traditionally held on the day of 'Ashura, they developed to include ten different sessions (*majalis*) covering the affairs of the first ten days of Muharram in 680. Essentially, each one of these sessions highlighted a particular event that occurred during the siege of the Husayn camp, leading up to the killing of Husayn on 'Ashura itself, the 10th day of Muharram. Accordingly, it could be argued that when there are no restrictions on commemorating 'Ashura, the mourning rituals do not only spread by location but also develop in terms of their duration (Nakash, 1993).

Nakash (1993) notes that the second oldest ritual after the previous memorial services is *ziyara*, the ritual of visitation. Similar to memorial services, *ziyara* at the tomb of Husayn in Karbala on *ziyarat* 'Ashura, the day of 'Ashura, and on *ziyarat al-Arba'in*, the Day of the fortieth also contributed to the dissemination of the commemoration of 'Ashura among different Muslim communities. Karbala became a centre where Shi'a from different places met, socialised and learnt about 'Ashura rituals. Nakash (1993, p. 149) notes that the ritual of *tatbir* or head-cutting was transmitted to the shrine cities in the nineteenth century by the Shi'a of Turkish origin. Al-Wardi (1965), al-Haidari (2007), and Nakash (1994) argue that when Iraqis adopted them, the rituals of *tatbir* remained mainly confined to Karbala and other shrine cities. They also add that *tatbir* is not widely practised or as popular as other rituals. Similar to *tatbir*, the observance of harsh breast-beating and chain-flagellation only came to Iraq in the nineteenth century through Shi'a Turks and Persians who observed these ritualised practices in Karbala and the shrine cities. According to

Nakash (p. 150), the rituals of harsh breast-beating and flagellation were more widespread in Iraq than head-cutting.

Whilst it is true that *ziyara,* the visitation ritual, has played a crucial role in introducing elements of the commemoration of ‘Ashura from other places into Iraq, Nakash argues that processions were crucial to the spreading of ‘Ashura rituals outwards from the shrine cities. Nakash (1994, p. 150) notes that the ritualised practices of breast-beating and chain-flagellation became part of public processions, so when processions began to be observed in villages and towns, the ritualised practices of breast-beating and chain-flagellation spread to other communities. Nakash (1994, p. 143) notes that the situation changed slightly during the domination of Ottoman rulers in Iraq (1534-1704 and 1831-1920). Whilst the Ottoman rulers in Iraq generally prohibited the commemoration of ‘Ashura, they allowed it during the rule of the governor ‘Ali Rida (1831-1842). Nakash explains that this was to placate the Shi‘a of Iraq in the face of the expansionist policies of Muhammad ‘Ali (1805-1848), the founder of the modern Egypt, and a rival of the Ottoman Empire. The policy permitted the spread of processions from Iran to the shrine cities and subsequently to other cities in Iraq, but this promoted calls from some Sunni religious leaders to restrict and even abolish them (Nakash, 1993).

The ritual of *tashabih* or dramatic play, which was established during the Safavid era (1501-1722), also played a role in introducing and reinforcing the commemoration of ‘Ashura although not to the same extent as processions. Nakash (1994, p. 147) notes that *tashabih*, re-enacting the tragedy in the form of a play, was transmitted from Iran to the shrine cities in Iraq, Najaf, Karbala, and Kadhemiyya, by large numbers of Iranian pilgrims.

It should be noted, however, that the transmission of rituals, as explained before, also involves modifications of the ritualised practices to fit the culture of a particular community. Al-Wardi (1965) and Nakash (1994) note that when the mourning rituals spread to Iraqi villages near the shrine cities, there was an emphasis on masculinity, courage, pride, and honour, elements that are valued in tribal society. For example, both al-Wardi and Nakash note that Arab villagers placed a great emphasis on the masculinity and courage of Abbas, son of ‘Ali and Husayn’s half-brother. Nakash (1994, p. 147) argues that Abbas is less popular in Iran because he was not imagined in Iran the way he is portrayed in Iraq.

In the Iraqi context, Nakash (p. 144) argues that the strong Arab tribal character of Iraqi Shi‘a society found its embodiment in the image of Abbas. Nakash (p. 147) argues that Abbas is not represented as a symbol of religious piety, but rather as the protector of Husayn, and by implication, of religion. According to Nakash, Abbas is presented by Iraqi villagers as a handsome man who rode a noble horse and carried Husayn’s banner. In the battle of Karbala, Abbas demonstrated the ultimate courage by taking upon himself the dangerous mission of breaking the siege of Husayn’s camp and bringing water to his thirsty brother, and to the women and children. He was finally overcome by his attackers (Nakash, p. 148). Al-Wardi (1965), however, argues that whilst it is true that creating this image of Abbas fits within the dominant cultural trope of masculinity and manhood within a tribal society, it can also be explained on the basis of *al-methaliya* or idealism, another prominent feature of tribal society. In fact, from al-Wardi’s view, the narrative of the commemoration of ‘Ashura, its imagery and poetry, all fit within the notion of *al-methaliya*.

Up until this point of the discussion, it seems that human contact plays a crucial role in transmitting ‘Ashura rituals on intra-and inter-levels. Surveying the related literature shows that only a few scholars discuss the possible role of other channels (i.e., the media) in transmitting ‘Ashura rituals. Whilst examining the dynamics of ‘Ashura in Bahrain, for instance, Fibiger (2010) notes that during Muharram the Shi‘a listen to ‘Ashura sermons in mosques or through the media, especially the Shi‘a sponsored satellite channels, suggesting that the media does play a role in the transmission of ‘Ashura sermons. Similarly, in a study concerning ‘Ashura rituals in Edinburgh, Alibhai (2018, p. 7) notes that “the processions also appear, from associated YouTube videos and flyers in print and social media”, suggesting that social media works as a medium for the rituals’ transmission. On the other hand, al-Hilli (2017, p. 86) argues that there is a lack of media publicity of the millions who undertake *mashaya,* the walk to Karbala every year. Al-Hilli notes that not enough work has been put in to enhance media publicity for the ‘Ashura rituals to the world.

Based on the aforementioned discussion, it seems that the freedom to conduct the mourning rituals in public is crucial to their spread on intra and inter-levels, and this is mainly the case when the Shi‘a have enjoyed an undisturbed exercise of their traditions and rituals. From here the literature is studied to understand the strength and the strategic use of the rituals within the SRT framework.

These are discussed in the following sections, which will make references particularly to ‘Ashura rituals after 2003.

4.2 The Strength of ‘Ashura Rituals

According to SRT, the strength of ritual dynamics depends on the elements of visibility, repetitiveness, similarity and the resources of the ritual. Al-Haidari (2007), Jabar (2010), Fernea (1989), and Nakash (1994, 1993) all find that ‘Ashura rituals are indeed conspicuous to varying degrees, that they are practiced regularly, serving similar purposes according to circumstance, and are being amply resourced. However, context is curial. Following the same trend of rituals dynamics, and from the start of the commemoration during the Umayyad caliphate (662-750) to current-day Iraq, the strength of ‘Ashura rituals depends on the level of endorsement or the lack of it, by the those in power.

Secretive and low profile characterise the connumeration of ‘Ashura during the Umayyad *caliphate*, given that mourning Husayn’s death was not permitted (Nakash, 1994). According to Nakash (1994, 1993), the Umayyad persecuted and marginalised the Shi‘a, preventing any public gatherings to mourn the death of Husayn in an attempt to erase any memories of the Battle of Karbala. Notwithstanding this restriction, Shi‘a Imams of that period seemed committed to commemorating ‘Ashura, albeit privately, by conducting memorial services, which included crying and oral recitations recounting the battle (Nakash, 1993, 1994; Shams al-Din, 1985).

After the collapse of the Umayyad *caliphate*, the commemoration of the killing of Husayn gained some strength given that the Abbasid *caliphate* (750-1258), particularly at the beginning of their reign, were more tolerant to ‘Ashura rituals than the Umayyad. They allowed the accounts previously restricted to oral transmission to be incorporated into the literary corpus, resulting in the inclusion of these largely Shi‘a accounts into a plethora of mainstream Sunni literary and historical sources (Nakash, 1993; Shams al-Din, 1985). Nakash (1993) explains that allowing the Shi‘a to commemorate ‘Ashura was a reward for their support in toppling the Umayyad *caliphate*. However, the alliance between the Shi‘a and the Abbasid did not last long. Once in power, as Nakash (1993) notes, the Abbasid started to distance themselves from the Shi‘a so as to gain wider support and legitimacy from the majority of the Muslim world. In addition, the Shi‘a realised that

the Abbasid caliphs were as corrupt as their predecessors (Nakash, 1993). The relationship deteriorated to the point that, in 850, one of the Abbasid caliphs banned visitation to Husayn's shrine in Karbala and ordered the shrine to be demolished (Nakash, 1993). He also banned the commemoration of 'Ashura and persecuted those who challenged the ban (Nakash, 1993).

In contrast to the Abbasid caliphs, when the Buyids, a local Shi'a Iranian dynasty in Western Persia, current day Iran, took control of Baghdad, the visibility of the commemoration increased. The rites of remembrance of Husayn were granted a fertile ground in which to grow, and the freedom to evolve and be expressed openly in public. Nakash (1993) argues that it was under the Buyids reign that the first historical reference to a public procession was documented:

> On the tenth of Muharram of this year (963 AD/352 AH)[A.H is Islamic year and A. D. is Gregorian year], Mu'izz al Dawlah Ibn Buyeh … ordered that the markets to be closed, and that the women should wear coarse woolen [sic] hair cloth, and that they should go into the markets with their faces uncovered and their hair dishevelled, beating their faces and wailing over Husayn. The people of the Suunah [Sunnis] could not prevent this spectacle because of the large numbers of the Shi'a and because of their increasing prominence, and because the Sultan was on their side (p. 169).

Another chapter for 'Ashura rituals started with the rise of the Safavid (1501-1722), a powerful Shi'a Dynasty in Persia. Many scholars argue that the rule of this Shi'a dynasty critically influenced the development of 'Ashura rituals (al-Wardi, 1969; Nakash, 1994). The Safavid Shi'a scholars, for instance, developed radical hagiographic characteristics of Husayn and Karbala in their literary sources (Nakash, 1993). The different human elements involved in the mourning rituals, including wailing chanters, reciters and storytellers became more numerous (Nakash, 1994). On the other hand, the developing emphasis on 'Ashura rituals in Persia could also be seen as a mechanism to unite and motivate the Shi'a to challenge their regional Sunni power, the Ottoman Empire (1534-1918), which occupied much of the current Iraqi territory (al-Wardi, 1969). Nakash (1994, p. 143) notes that the Ottoman rulers in Iraq generally restricted the commemoration of 'Ashura except in Najaf and Karbala where they did not have much control and influence. Despite such a restriction, the rituals still constituted an integral part of the religious, social and political characteristics of Shi'a communities in Iraq, where religious beliefs and rituals were dominant due to the socio-political reality of poverty, illiteracy and corruption under the Ottoman rule (al-Wardi, 1969).

In contrast to the periods just previously described, the mourning rituals waned in Iraq due to post-1921 socio-political changes. After the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in 1917, the British occupied Iraq. In 1921, Iraq was created as a political entity and the British installed Faisal, a Sunni Muslim, as king, providing him with a government that came to be dominated by the Sunni (Nakash, 1994, p. 75). The Sunni-dominated government restricted the commemoration to eradicate its effectiveness as a political instrument, which reduced its visibility and prominence (Nakash, 1994, p. 155). The reason for this as al-Wardi (1969), Haddad (2011), and Nakash (1994) argue, was to create and promote a sense of Iraqi nationhood that did not include sectarian symbols. For example, in 1932, public processions in Al-Kadhemiyya, a suburb of Baghdad which was the burial place of the seventh and ninth Imams, Musa al-Kadhim (745-799) and Muhammad al-Jawad (811-835), were not well attended because they were held under tight police control, which reduced the level of religious fervour (Nakash, p. 158). From the Shi‘a religious establishment perspective, however, that approach to nation-building was itself motivated by sectarian attitudes (Nakash, p. 158).

Perhaps, the commemoration of ‘Ashura was more restricted in Baghdad than other cities and villages. The visibility of ‘Ashura rituals, for instance, is discussed by the anthropologist Elizabeth Fernea (1989), who observed the *tashabih* or play held in the Shi‘a village of El Nahra in 1956, an occasion that drew many people to this small village in southern Iraq and that she described in the following terms:

> The play took place in an open field, with as many costumed players riding horses taking part. The players were divided into two main groups respecting the camps of Husayn and Ibn Sa‘d [the head of the army who killed Husayn]. The audience was also involved in the re-enactment of the battle. Men and women cheered the forces of Husayn and hissed those of Ibn Sa‘d. The play culminated in the passing of rifles from the audience to the players, who would then shoot bullets over each other’s heads (p. 203).

The annual commemoration of ‘Ashura, however, was almost extinguished after the Ba‘ath Party assumed power in 1968. Due to its authoritarian nature, the Ba‘ath imposed harsher restriction on the annual commemoration of ‘Ashura throughout Iraq. In fact, the Party banned the mourning processions. Those who violated the ban were severely punished. The commemoration therefore reached its lowest level of visibility since the establishment of the state of Iraq in 1921. This however, all changed after the toppling of the Ba‘ath Party in 2003 and the rise of the Shi‘a

majority in Iraq to power. To underscore the visibility of the commemoration, and given that the fall of Baghdad coincided with the commemoration of ‘Ashura, it was reported that about two million people gathered in Karbala to mourn the killing of Husayn (Nasr, 2016, p. 19). Haddad (2011) explains that the majority of the Shi‘a now felt that they could openly practice their beliefs and rituals without restrictions.

In Baghdad, Jabar (2010, p. 26) notes that right after the invasion, there were several Iraqis practicing self-flagellation in public processions, mostly from a poor Shi‘a majority neighbourhood, Sadr city. In Jabar’s view, their practices symbolised protest, the suffering of the Shi‘a, and an allegiance to Imam Husayn. In particular, Jabar explains that inflicting physical pain on their bodies symbolised letting go of the suffering of the past. Nasr (2016, p. 19) notes that whilst CNN was covering the jubilant Iraqis witnessing the collapse of the statue of Saddam in Baghdad, as everyone was following the news from Iraq, the coverage turned to scenes of young Shi‘a men wearing black shirts practicing *latum* in the shrine of Imam Husayn in Karbala. Nasr (p. 19) describes the images as “magnetic, at once jubilant and defiant” but also mentions that many Sunnis who were watching CNN were aghast at what they were seeing.

The visibility of the commemoration of ‘Ashura post-2003 is also observed by Pierre, Hutchinson and Abdulrazak (2007, p. 61) who describe that, rows of Shi‘a men in processions loudly exclaiming ‘*YA* Husayn’ (Oh Husayn) striking their exposed backs with chains while marching, an act accompanied by the dropping of blood from gashes cut deep into their skin. It is perhaps as a testament to the visibility of this ritual that the processions were banned during the rule of the Ba‘ath Party. In fact, Pierre, Hutchinson and Abdulrazak (p. 61) describe ‘Ashura mourning processions as one of the world’s great religious processions, given the large number of participants and the zeal expressed. For Nikjoo, Razavizadeh, and Di Giovine (2020), the main visible form of the commemoration is *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*, in which generally involved walking from different cities and villages to visit the shrine of Imam Husayn in Karbala. They note that despite the threat from ISIS, millions of Shi‘a including around two millions of Iranian pilgrims participated in *ziyarat al-Arba‘*in in 2014.

Overall, for many scholars, number of participants is one of the major factors when it comes to assessing the visibility of the commemoration of ‘Ashura (Jabar, 2010; Haddad, 2011; Nasr, 2016).

The repetitiveness of the rituals follows a similar trend as its visibility, in that the rituals have been practised frequently since 2003. As noted earlier, the mourning rituals of ‘Ashura are practiced within the first two months of the Islamic calendar, Muharram and Safar. Whilst the killing of Husayn and his companions is remembered on the first ten days of Muharram, *al-Arba‘in*, the 20th of Safar, marks the end of the forty-day mourning period. Jabar (2010, p. 322) notes that the Shi‘a hold memorial services daily during the first ten days of Muharram. Similarly, according to Nakash (1994, p. 150), numerous mourning processions including chest-beating and chain-flagellation are performed during the same period in villages, towns, and shrine cities. Nakash observes that while there are many processions with head-cutting (*mawakib al-tatbir*), they are held only on the actual day of ‘Ashura. To end the mourning period, a large number of *mashaya* or groups of walkers embark on journeys from different Iraqi cities and villages and head for Karbala for *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* (al-Haidari, 2007).

According to Norton (2005, p. 144), during the monthlong mourning period, weddings and other joyous events are overshadowed by practices related to a time of mourning not celebration. All ‘Ashura rituals including processions and memorial services work to re-enact the grief and the suffering of the battle of Karbala (al-Haidari, 2007; Fibiger, 2010; Nakash, 1994; Ram, 1996). Ram (p.72) argues that proving worthy of the Imam’s intercession means that the faithful should constantly re-enact his grief and suffering on ‘Ashura. As citied by Ram, the eighth Imam ‘Ali al-Ritha reportedly reassured his partisans on this account:

> …he who takes the day of Ashura as the day of his afflictions and grief and weeping, God would make the day of resurrection a day of joy and exaltation, and we [the Household of the Prophet] shall be a comfort and security for him in Paradise (p. 72).

In terms of similarity, just as not all of ‘Ashura rituals are equally visible nor are they all are practiced at the same frequency, they also vary in terms of the modalities of expressing grief (Nakash, 1994). According to Nakash, the expression of grief can be very intense as in the ritualised practices of *latum* and *tatbir*. In contrast, the grief may be only symbolically expressed by the wearing of black clothing (al-Haidari, 2007; Jabar, 2010; Nakash, 1993).

Finally, when it comes to resources, scholars remark that rulers, governments, political parties, religious establishments, prominent Shi‘a religious families, and both affluent and less affluent individuals have been funding ‘Ashura rituals until recent times (al-Haidari, 2007; Jabar, 2010; Chatelard, 2017; Nakash, 1994, 1993). For memorial services, Nakash (1994, p. 145) notes that they can range from being relatively simple to highly elaborate depending on the hosts and the amount of money they can afford to spend. Food offered during or after the memorial services is the costliest item for the hosts, followed by the fees for the reciters (Jabar, 2010). However, al-Wardi (1965) and Nakash (1994, p. 145) recognise that social status also plays a role in sponsoring memorial services. Memorial services held by prominent religious families and wealthy individuals are well-attended, longer, and more elaborate in terms of the food offered. Al-Haidari (2007), however, finds that irrespective of social status and wealth, food is generally offered in large quantities, symbolising the generosity of the host, and in return, a hope for a generous blessing from Husayn. Often, however, this generosity leads to excess and waste.

Whilst it is common for individuals, irrespective of their wealth, to sponsor memorial services, processions generally require more human and financial resources and thus they tend to be sponsored by religious establishments or wealthy individuals, tribal leaders, and politicians (al-Haidari, 2007; Jabar, 2010; Nakash, 1994). Nakash (1994, p. 145) argues that sponsoring a procession expresses the religious piety of the host but also allows the sponsor(s) to gain esteem and higher social status. Within a similar context, Nakash notes that the wives of government officials or prominent Shi‘a religious families also host memorial services for the women of the community. More details are provided about the socioeconomic benefits of sponsoring ‘Ashura rituals when discussing the strategic use of rituals later in this chapter.

All of the above sources of funding are subject to socio-political factors. It is reasonable to argue that ‘Ashura rituals required fewer resources before 2003, when there were restrictions, and more resources required post-2003. In fact, post-2003, additional resources are allocated to the rituals, provided by government organisations to provide security services and transportation to those who are participating in *ziyara* (Pierre, Hutchinson and Abdulrazak, 2007, p. 61). However, there are no numbers provided to account, for example, for the amount the Shi‘a collectively spend on the commemoration of ‘Ashura and whether the annual commemoration contributes to the Iraqi

economy, given that millions of Shi‘a from Iraqi and from abroad have commemorated ‘Ashura annually since 2003. In summary, the examination of the strength of ‘Ashura rituals through exploring the visibility, repetitiveness, similarity, and resources shows ‘Ashura rituals collectively are more visible and repetitive post-2003 and use more human and financial resources. In the following sections, I shall examine the related literature to understand whether ‘Ashura rituals have been used strategically.

4.3 The strategic use of ‘Ashura rituals

When it comes to the strategic use of ‘Ashura rituals, it can be argued that the *marja‘iyya* uses the commemoration of ‘Ashura as a primary tool of influence (al-Wardi, 1969; al-Qarawee, 2014, Jabar, 2010; Nakash, 1994). As discussed in Chapter Three, Knottnerus (2012), notes that there are several ways that ritualised symbolic practices may be manipulated to achieve a certain outcome, identifying four agents participating in strategic ritualisation: ritual legitimators, ritual sponsors, ritual entrepreneurs, and rituals enforcers. Based on these four agents, the related literature is examined here in order to explore the strategic use of ‘Ashura rituals. The argument that will be presented is that the *marja‘iyya*, Shi’a central religious authority, act simultaneously as legitimator, sponsor entrepreneur and enforcer of ‘Ashura rituals.

In terms of ritual legitimators, the *marja‘iyya* doubtlessly falls in this category (al-Abieath, 2017, p. 130). The commemoration of ‘Ashura has always featured heavily in the teaching of the *marja‘iyya* (al-Haidari, 2007; Nakash, 1993, 1994; Pierre, Hutchinson and Abdulrazak, 2007). Within its power, the *marja‘iyya* has the capacity to authorise the mourning rituals of ‘Ashura because after all, this Shi‘a religious authority acts as an agent in the absence of the last Imam, al-Mahdi (Nakash, 1994). It was the same Shi’a clerical authority the one who authorised, for instance, the ritual of *tashabih* or play, which was established during the Safavid era (Nakash, 1994).

The *marja‘iyya* also acts as the ritual’s sponsor because *mujtahids* have the authority to initiate, promote, regulate, criticise or even ban some of the ritualised practices (al-Haidari, 2007; al-Wardi, 1969; Nakash, 1994). Nakash (1994, p. 156) notes that some *mujtahids* issued some years ago a *fatwa* or religious ruling to ban the practice of *latum* since this ritual led at times to the loss of

human life. According to Nakash, the dilemma for the Shi‘a religious establishment “was what type of ‘Ashura rituals should be allowed in order to preserve Shi‘a identity as well as their influence over the laity” (p. 155) explicitly recognising the use of ‘Ashura rituals strategically by the Shi‘a religious establishment in Iraq.

Nakash (1994) also argues that the narrative of the *mujtahids* often reminds the faithful that “the Imams themselves encouraged their followers to weep for them, thereby seeking to evoke every year the sorrow and the memory of Karbala and to transmit it to generations to come” (p.165). In this subtle dimension of ritual sponsorship, Nakash explains that evoking Shi‘a emotions through the act of weeping allows the believer to relate the past with the present by linking Husayn’s experience to that of the believer in his own lifetime, an act which enables the believer to identify himself/herself with Husayn’s cause and to voice regret for not being able to be with him in Karbala and helping him to win the battle. Through weeping, the believer can also “protest emotionally against injustice and oppression as he experienced him around himself” (Nakash, 1994, p. 165). Put somewhat differently, the strategic use of ‘Ashura rituals to keep Husayn’s revolution relevant and active in the present may be achieved through arousing the emotions of participants.

The strategic use of ‘Ashura rituals by the *marja‘iyya* as ritual sponsors cannot be completely understood without discussing the element of ‘rewards’. It is true that in Shi‘ism, the non-*mujtahids*, also called the *ammi* or ordinary people, are obliged to follow or imitate (*taqlid*) a *mujtahid*, but *mujtahids* also motivate people to commemorate ‘Ashura by emphasising that people will be rewarded in the hereafter for mourning Husayn in the present (al-Haidari, 2007; al-Hilli, 2017; al-Wardi, 1969; Jabar, 2010; Nakash, 1994; Shams al-Din, 1985). Referring to one of the most noted Shi’a clerics of the 20th century, Nakash (1993, p. 165) notes that the *mujtahid* Muhsim al-Amin “dedicated an entire session in the memorial services to the importance of weeping and the reward to be gained from it”.

Traditionally, the *marja‘iyya* has strategically used the commemoration of ‘Ashura to spread Shi‘ism, to present their own interpretation of Islam, and to make the Shi‘a masses aware of their heritage and the fact that they have been victimised (Chatelard, 2017; Nasr, 2016). Nakash (1994, p. 154), however, also notes that ‘Ashura rituals may be used strategically because they provide

socioeconomic benefits for the *marja'iyya*. He argues that many *mujtahids* and Sayyids, [Sayyid is an official title used in Shi'a Islam, given to a descendent of the lineage of the House of the Prophet] who are descended from the lineage of the House of the Prophet Muhammad, have a customary and vested economic interest in maintaining 'Ashura rituals because they provide an important source of income for them. Nakash notes that memorial services during 'Ashura generate financial benefits for religious leaders through delivering sermons, and through processions where a very large number of visitors come to the shrine cities. Corboz (2016) and Nakash (1994) also note that the *marja'iyya* is responsible for managing generous donations to the shrines of Imams especially from foreign visitors during 'Ashura. Accordingly, Shi'a religious leaders, generally identified as ritual legitimators and sponsors, can also be regarded as ritual entrepreneurs as they benefit financially from 'Ashura rituals.

Nakash (p. 166) also draws a link between the commemoration of 'Ashura and the economic benefits for Karbala and the other shrine cities, arguing that they cater to the needs of visitors of different social classes and ethnic groups, and have developed various types of recreational activities and lodging arrangements for these visitors. Nakash (p. 155) notes that the influx of visitors during 'Ashura provides income for the owners of hotels, restaurants and other services. As such, they can also be identified as ritual entrepreneurs. In fact, this is regarded as a major source of income for Karbala and the other shrine cities (Nakash, p. 167), a process that Chatelard (2017, p. 5) has explained in more detail in recent years:

> Families of traders have taken advantage of the religious tourism boom, investing in travel agencies and the hospitality industry, expanding their commercial and funerary businesses and benefitting from rising real estate prices in the Old City. Many have vacated or sold their traditional family homes, and the more affluent people have built modern villas in the new neighbourhoods. Yet some members of the old merchant class, together with groups of lay intellectuals, feel uncomfortable about the nature and pace of urban change.

Given the financial benefits and the economic opportunities, communities in return recognise and support the role of the *marja'iyya* in authorising the rituals. Corboz (2016, p. 189) explains that the *marja'iyya* need community recognition because "without a community recognition of its leadership, the Shi'a religious establishment would not have any *raison d'être*". In that regard Nakash (1994, p. 167) argues that the general boosting of the economy of shrine cities benefits the

marja'iyya, because it provides an additional sources of legitimacy and, therefore, enhances their socio-religious status.

Not surprisingly, the restriction and banning of 'Ashura rituals during the rule of the Ba'ath Party impacted the economies of the shrine cities negatively. Chatelard (2017, p. 2) argues that Najaf, Karbala, and other shrine cities were especially thwarted during the decades of Ba'athist rule in Iraq. The cities were neglected, and some neighbourhoods deliberately destroyed. However, since 2003 they have experienced a remarkable resurgence, following the replacement of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime with a Shi'a-dominated government. Since 2003, Najaf and Karbala have received up to four million foreign pilgrims yearly, 90% of them Iranian, and an equally large number of Iraqi religious visitors (Chatelard, 2017, p. 2). In fact, within the context of the strategic use of rituals, as noted by Nikjoo, Razavizadeh, and Di Giovine (2020, p. 9), "the Iranian state had been encouraging and promoting Iranians to attend *al-Arba'in* Pilgrimage".

As discussed earlier, 'Ashura rituals were banned or severely restricted in Iraq under Ba'athist rule between 1968 and 2003, and are commonly presented as having experienced a revival since the regime change in 2003 (Abbas, 2017, p. 7). Chatelard (2017) argues that "What is happening is not, however, a simple restoration. These rituals, reinvigorated and reinvented, are harnessed by a variety of social agents" (p. 2). The growing religiosity in Iraq in the 1990s, for reasons that will be discussed later in this chapter in section 4.5.2.2, created demands for religious goods, hence revitalising the social appeal of religious actors. In addition, it was the clerical authorities who were viewed by the Shi'a as the real opposition to the regime of Saddam Hussein (Jabar, 2010). In that respect, al-Qarawee (2018) argues that although weakened and divided, Shi'a clerical authority remained among the few autonomous actors who survived the Ba'ath rule without fully losing their social capital. Al-Qarawee (2018) points out that 'Ali al-Sistani, the Najaf-based grand *marja'*, emerged as the most influential political and religious figure in post-2003 Iraq. Al-Sistani assumed this powerful position after decades of aggressive secularisation, and the marginalisation of the Shi'a in general and the Shi'a clerical class in particular under the Sunni domination of power prior to 2003. All this will be elaborated on in the discussions of the social outcomes of the commemorating 'Ashura in sections: 4.5.2.1, and 4.5.2.2.

Pierre, Hutchinson and Abdulrazak (2007, p. 66), however, argue that the annual evocation of Shi‘a emotions by the *marja‘iyya* has paid off: “after 1,400 years of Sunni hegemony in the region and literal subjugation of the Shi‘a under Sunni rule, Husayn’s spiritual heirs [the *marja‘iyya* represented by ‘Ali al-Sistani] established the first Shi‘a led Arab nation in history”. On this basis, the *marja‘iyya* can be seen to be acting also as a ritual enforcer. Furthermore, al-Sistani used the episode of Karbala to protect the State from terrorism (al-Rahim, 2005). Al-Rahim (p.5) argues that al-Sistani exhorted Shi‘a Iraqis to defy the terrorists and take up the struggle on behalf of justice, a struggle that the story of Husayn powerfully evokes among them.

Surveying the related literature to identify ritual enforcers of ‘Ashura rituals shows that in addition to the *marja‘iyya*, Shi‘a politicians and Shi’a Islamist political parties fit within the category of ritual enforcer. Pierre, Hutchinson and Abdulrazak (2007, p. 65) argue that following the leads of the *marja‘iyya*, Shi‘a political parties use the commemoration of ‘Ashura to mobilise the Shi‘a masses. The strategy is simple: ‘Ashura rituals allow the Shi‘a to revive memories of the battle of Karbala and to use religious language and symbolism to identify good and evil, and to join God against the devil. This places the followers of Husayn, the Shi‘a, on one side against all others. Chatelard (2017, p. 6) presents a similar view arguing that public authorities in post-2003 Iraq have encouraged mass gatherings and processions, yet still aim to control the high number of visitors, especially in shrine cities such as Karbala, Najaf, and Kadhemiyya. Chatelard (p. 6) explains that processions “are institutionalised, orchestrated and policed; grief and piety are channelled towards reinforcing a sense of communal identity and cohesion; and great effort is exerted to avoid discord with the community of the faithful”. Chatelard underscores a crucial point, arguing that the processions are used by Iraqi politicians and the Shi‘a religious establishment to mobilise Shi‘a masses, to motivate them, and to intimidate ISIS:

> This process was particularly visible during the 2016 commemoration, when the Iraqi state and Shi‘a religious authorities galvanised the Iraqi populace as well as the armed forces in preparation for the imminent launch of a major military operation aimed at retaking Mosul and the surrounding region from Islamic State, which had occupied it since 2014 (P. 6).

Despite their prominent role in Iraqi politics post-2003, and their central role in the commemoration of the ‘Ashura rituals as outlined above, little is known about the *marja‘iyya*

(Corboz, 2016). It is known as the Shi‘a religious establishment and often described as an informal system of religious authority. According to Corboz (2016, p. 26), the *marja‘iyya* lacks institutional structure; their authority networks are formed to a large extent along interpersonal and familial ties. In addition, even their political role in Iraq is ambiguous. Corboz (2016, p. 260) notes that the political involvement of the *marja‘iyya* in Iraq is an infinite source of debate. It is unclear whether they act as source of opposition, or if they want to establish an Islamic state under their rule. Corboz (p. 260) argues, however, that their political involvement cannot be underestimated.

In summary, the discussion of the strategic use of ‘Ashura rituals relying on the views and arguments presented by scholars who studied ‘Ashura rituals suggests that the *marja‘iyya* acts as legitimators, sponsors, entrepreneurs, and enforcers of ‘Ashura rituals. After discussing the strategic use of ‘Ashura rituals, in the following sections, I will discuss ‘Ashura rituals from the perspective of the third element of SRT, the symbolic meanings of rituals.

4.4 Symbolic meanings of ‘Ashura rituals

‘Ashura, a significant annual event in the Shi‘a Muslim world, is devoted in principle to commemorating Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, killed in the Battle of Karbala in 680 (Nakash, 1994, p. 142). Through the theoretical approach of SRT adopted in this study, the literature has been studied to explore symbolic meanings expressed by ‘Ashura rituals. When examining the relevant literature, three main symbolic meanings come to the fore: rejection of Sunni hegemony, political activism, and group identity (al-Haidari, 2007; Fibiger, 2010; Nakash, 1994). They will be explored separately in the following sections.

4.4.1 Rejection of Sunni hegemony

‘Ashura rituals could be interpreted as a symbol of the rejection of the Sunni hegemony that started with the killing of Husayn. Husain (2018, p. 58) argues that within the Islamic World, there are many Shi‘a grievances against the Sunni majority who have been the stronger group both numerically and militarily throughout Islamic history. According to al-Haidari (2007) and Nakash (1994), the Shi‘a rejection is distinctly manifest in their outrage over the tragedy of Karbala. This outrage is expressed in the ritualised practices of wearing black clothing, wailing, weeping, flagellation, and processions, all of which seems to be directed at Muslims who, in one way or

another, were involved, contributed, or even those who do not condemn the tragedy of Karbala (al-Wardi, 1969; Nakash, 1994).

Most Shi‘a communities whether in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Pakistan, or Iraq pre-2003, have experienced marginalisation by the Sunnis in their respective country (Deeb, 2005; Fibiger, 2010; Haddad, 2011; Matthiesen, 2015; Nasr, 2016). According to Pierre, Hutchinson and Abdulrazak (2007, p. 66), during the commemoration of ‘Ashura, the Shi‘a traditionally blame the Sunni for what they regard as the murdering of Shi’a leaders and the debasing of the sect’s distinctive rituals over a period of more than a thousand years. Moreover, they hold the Sunni responsible for anciently and unapologetically banishing, imprisoning, and murdering 11 of the 12 Imams who are so sacred and essential to Shi‘a beliefs (Pierre, Hutchinson and Abdulrazak, p. 66). Nasr (2016) argues that it is true that the Shi‘a mourn their Imam during ‘Ashura, but also that the Shi’a commemorate ‘Ashura in large part due to the long history of domination and persecution at the hands of the Sunni. In addition, as discussed in the introduction, there is a correlation between the severity of Sunni hegemony and the intensity of commemorating the death of Husayn. However, as Nasr (2016) and Husain (2018) argue, the anger expressed by the rituals may also be perceived differently by other communities such as the Sunni, who generally see in them a symbol of division and /or sectarian tension among Muslims.

4.4.2 Political activism

‘Ashura rituals can also symbolise political activism. Surveying the related literature shows that the Shi‘a are not only encouraged to weep over the episode of Karbala, a passive interpretation, but also to protest against injustice and oppression as they experience it (Nakash, 1993, p. 165). After all, using the narrative of Karbala and the tragedy of Husayn as an inspiration for fighting injustice and tyranny seems a rather inevitable outcome. According to Nakash (1993), Nejad (2013), and Hassner (2011), protests often erupt during ‘Ashura processions. As Hassner (2011) articulates:

> Ashura [‘Ashura] processions have produced launching points for anti-Shah rebellions in pre-revolutionary Iran; mass protests against the Saudi government in 1979; sectarian clashes during the Lebanese civil war; anti-Israeli protests in Southern Lebanon; uprising in Bahrain in the 1990s; the anti-Ba‘athist rebellion in 1972, 1974 and after the First Gulf War; and sectarian violence in Iraq in the aftermath of the Second Gulf war (p. 505).

An important point to be discerned from the aforementioned discussion is that the political activism expressed mainly through mourning processions of ‘Ashura and *al-Arba‘in* is not only directed at the Sunni. Ram (1996, p. 70) explains that the Karbala paradigm is a living reality believed to have once happened in primeval times, the dawn of Islam, and continuing ever since to influence the Shi‘a. Ram argues that “it is not symbolic but rather a direct expression of reality” (p. 70). Ram adds that all human history is pictured as a continuous struggle between the forces of evil and the forces of good. Put succinctly, in every age there is an oppressed Husayn, a man who fought on the side of God, and a tyrannical Yazid, who fights against God. Thus, the Karbala paradigm made a struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil a perpetual reality in the Shi‘a collective self-consciousness; hence the well-known Shi‘a slogan ‘every place is Karbala and every day is ‘Ashura’. Dabashi (2005, p. 91) also postulates clearer politicisations of the rituals, as in the example of Ruhollah Khomeini, accrediting to him the success of reviving processions as political tools. He argues that this prominent Iranian *mujtahid*, who has had a great influence on the advancement of Shi‘ism in recent history, also emphasised the politicisation of all other Islamic rituals.

4.4.3 Group identity

‘Ashura rituals symbolically separate the Shi‘a from the rest of Muslims. (Sindawi, 2006). According to Sindawi (2006, p. 231), “the mourning rituals serve to maintain the self-awareness of the Shi‘as [Shi‘as] as a group with its own identity, separate from Sunnis”. Despite historical discrimination and persecution, many scholars have attributed the survival of Shi‘a identity precisely to the mourning rituals of ‘Ashura (al-Haidari, 2007; Nakash, 1994; Nasr, 2016). In that regard, Nakash (1993, p. 161) argues that “no other single event in Islamic history has played so central role in shaping Shi‘a identity and communal sense as the martyrdom of Husayn and his companions in Karbala”. Nakash draws similarities between the Shi‘a and the Jewish people as victims of circumstances in the course of history, the battle of Karbala for the Shi‘a. Also, both Jewish people and Shi‘a Muslims share a sense of victimhood and have attempted to write their own histories through rituals and commemorations. Nakash compares ‘Ashura rituals to the Jewish practice of reading the Passover *Haggadah* in memory of the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. He argues that both practices seek to achieve a lasting impact on their audience, which would extend beyond the time and boundaries of the ritual itself (Nakash, 1994, p. 164). Thus, in reading

the *Haggadah*, Nakash notes, the Jewish people are reminded, "in each and every generation, each person should regard himself as though he had gone forth from Egypt" (p. 164). In Shi'ism, a similar impact is achieved through powerful verses such as the following: "As if every place is Karbala and each day is Ashura" (Nakash, 1994, p.146).

Al-Haidari (2007), explains that 'Ashura rituals, which include memorial services, the visitation of Husayn's shrine in Karbala, the public mourning processions and the representation of the battle of Karbala in the form of a play, bring Shi'a together, as they have done throughout the centuries. According to al-Haidari (2007) and Fibiger (2010), when Shi'a commemorate 'Ashura they socialise, cook and eat traditional food together, and discuss politics, social issues and other challenges. This further creates a sense of Shi'a solidarity and underscores a sense of separateness from the Sunni (al-Haidari, 2007). These gatherings have contributed to reinforcing Shi'a beliefs and a sense of belonging, both with each other and as a group, making the Shi'a a separate body within the larger body of Muslims, with their own rituals, and identity.

Overall, there is a consensus among scholars that the systematic marginalisation of the Shi'a contributed to reinforcing Shi'a identity (Haddad, 2011; Husain, 2018; Nakash, 1993; Nasr, 2016). Al-Wardi (1969) analyses the Shi'a identity on the basis of the combination of the concepts of *al-asabiya,* or solidarity and intolerance against another's beliefs and *al-methaliya,* or idealism. As discussed earlier, he does not link 'Ashura rituals to the notion of Shi'a victimhood. Nonetheless, other scholars contend that no other single event in Islamic history has played such a central role in shaping Shi'a identity as the 'martyrdom' of Husayn and his companions at Karbala (al-Haidari, 2007; Mallat, 1988; Nakash, 1993; Shams al-Din, 1985).

In summary, 'Ashura rituals communicate different symbolic meanings, since, according to Fibiger (2010), "Ashura is not entirely political or religious. It is neither a sectarian event nor a reflection of backward tradition" (p. 43). Similar to Fibiger's argument, Szanto (2013, p. 78) argues that the Muharram rituals and symbols are either traditional or modern, salvific or revolutionary In addition, the symbolic meanings of the rituals should not be stripped of context given that rituals are not static, as Mills and Bettner (1992, p. 191) caution: "Rituals do change in form, in symbolic meaning, and in social effects". After exploring the main symbolic meanings of 'Ashura rituals,

the following sections present the social outcomes of commemorating ‘Ashura, particularly in reference to Shi‘a-Sunni relations in Iraq.

4.5 ‘Ashura rituals and Shi‘a-Sunni relations: social outcomes

In order to understand the social significance of ‘Ashura rituals and their impact on Shi‘a-Sunni relations, all the factors already explored in this chapter will be re-contextualised in historical sequence, with the aim of clarifying their social dimension. As a starting point, al-Wardi (1969) and Nakash (1994) note that the establishment of Iraq as a political entity in 1921 was a major turning point for ‘Ashura rituals and Shi‘a-Sunni relations. They both argue that, prior to 1921 and under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, the rituals constituted an integral part of the religious, social, and political characteristics of Shi‘a communities in Iraq. Al-Wardi (1969) in particular, argues that sectarian tension was stronger prior to 1921. With the establishment of a monarchy in Iraq in 1921, the British appointed a Sunni dominated government, excluding the Shi‘a from power, a decision that impacted ritual dynamics. Under the rule of Sunni dominated governments which lasted until 2003, there were restrictions and bans on the rituals (Nakash, 1994). As a result of the restriction policies, and other elements which will be discussed in detail in the following section, ‘Ashura rituals, especially processions, lost their intensity. Many scholars agree that that broadly, nationalism replaced sect-focused identity as the main domestic feature in Iraq (Haddad, 2011; Nakash, 1994, Nasr, 2016).

The significance of 2003 derived from the fact that, for the first time since 1921, the Shi‘a majority assumed power, following the US invasion of Iraq (Haddad, 2011, Nasr, 2016). Under the rule of Shi‘a dominated governments, ‘Ashura rituals, especially processions, have become powerful again, and sensitivities and, at times, tensions have increased between the Shi‘a and the Sunni (Haddad, 2011, Nasr, 2016). Discussions underscoring the prominence of ‘Ashura rituals in creating changes within Iraqi society will be presented chronologically under three main time periods: pre-1921, from 1921 to 2003, and post-2003.

4.5.1 The social outcomes of ‘Ashura rituals pre-1921

Prior to 1921, Iraq represented more a geographical designation rather than a political or sociocultural entity and, as such, there was no Iraqi nationalist sentiment or platform (Haddad,

2011). In addition, religious and cultural practices were dominant, including ‘Ashura rituals. The following discussion will highlight the social outcomes of commemorating ‘Ashura at the time: the rise of Wahhabism, the conversion of Sunni tribes to Shi‘ism during the nineteenth century, and the unification of Shi‘a and Sunni Iraqis during the 1920 Iraqi revolt against the British.

4.5.1.1 ‘Ashura rituals agitated hard-core Sunni Muslims, the Wahhabis

It has been noted that Wahhabism emerged in Arabia to counter the influence of Shi‘a rituals, and the literature also indicates that the rise of Wahhabism has reinforced Shi‘a identity in Iraq (al-Wardi, 2005, p. 183). According to al-Wardi, Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792), the founder of Wahhabism in Arabia, advocated a purging of Shi‘a rituals and practices, including ‘Ashura and visitation to the Imams’ shrines, which he considered idolatrous, impure and wrong-headed innovations within Islam. Wahhabism, however, does not only oppose Shi‘a rituals and practices. According to Commins (2005, p. 81), Wahhabism also perceived the Sunni form of Islam adopted by the Ottoman rulers as illegitimate.

Furthermore, al-Wardi argues (2005, p. 196) that the Wahhabis were not satisfied with simply imposing strict Islamic rules in Arabia. Rather, motivated by their ideology of abolishing Shi‘a rituals and beliefs, they attacked Karbala in 1802 and attempted to raid Najaf, the two main shrine cities in Iraq (al-Wardi, p. 196-197). This act was perceived as a threat to the Shi‘a and thus served as a rallying cause for them (al-Wardi, p. 198; Nakash, 1994, p. 28).

The rise of Wahhabism motivated the *marja‘iyya,* the Shi‘a religious authority, to promote the conversion of Iraqi’s Sunni tribes to Shi‘ism in the 19th century, in order to counter the Wahhabi influence (Nakash, 1994, p. 28). According to Nakash (1994, p. 25), there is no evidence suggesting that the Shi‘a were ever close to forming a majority in Iraq before the nineteenth or even twentieth century. The Shi‘a only grew to constitute the majority of the population following the mass conversion of the bulk of Iraq’s nominally Sunni Arab tribes when they settled in Shi‘a dominated areas, mainly during the nineteenth century. It has emerged that ‘Ashura rituals played a crucial role in the process of converting the Sunni tribes to Shi‘ism (al-Wardi, 1969; Nakash, 1994). Calling ‘Ashura rituals ‘Shi‘a propaganda’, al-Wardi (1965, p. 238) argues that these rituals appealed to tribesmen, except for the weeping aspect, which is seen as a sign of weakness in Bedouin culture. Thus, Nakash (1994, p. 45) notes that Shi‘a religious leaders adjusted “Shi‘a

rituals to conform with Arab ideal attributes of manhood and Iraqi tribal style of celebration…which included clamorous receptions, horse riding, and firing weapons in the air" (p. 45). In addition, since the tribesmen always preferred to hear songs of heroes, religious leaders used 'Arabic poetry to dramatize the heroic stand of Husayn and his companions in the battle of Karbala' (Nakash, p. 45). The impact of this conversion on Shi'a-Sunni relations is significant, and an element that has become crucial to the ascendency of the Shi'a majority in the first democratic election held after the fall of the Ba'ath Party in 2003 (Jabar, 2010).

4.5.1.2 'Ashura rituals united Shi'a and Sunni Iraqis during the 1920 Iraqi revolt

When discussing Shi'a-Sunni relations in Iraq, there is a tendency to refer to the Shi'a-Sunni alliance formed in 1920, arguing that, when context permits, co-existence and even harmony between the two sects is possible (al-Wardi, 1969). In 1919, in fact, a coalition of Shi'a and Sunni Iraqis was formed to defend Iraq against the British invasion. The *marja'iyya*, the Shi'a religious authorities in Najaf and Karbala, assumed a leading role in this coalition, issuing a *fatwa* or religious ruling calling for *jihad*, a fight against the infidels, in this case the British forces. Haddad (2008, p. 454) explains that the Shi'a religious establishment took a leading role because Shi'a Islam was far less politically acquiescent than Sunni Islam due to the fact that the latter was traditionally controlled by the state under the Sunni Ottomans. The Sunni clergy in Ottoman times, Haddad adds, were little more than civil servants as they depended on the state for their income and their employment. The Shi'a clergy, who depended financially on their followers' goodwill rather than the state's for their income were more likely to challenge the Ottomans to whom they owed nothing (Haddad, p. 454).

To achieve its aim in the period leading up to and during the 1920 revolt, the *marja'iyya* attempted to reduce sectarian barriers. Within this context, it has emerged that the commemoration of 'Ashura played a crucial role in facilitating this unity. To try and create a common denominator, which would help mobilise both Sunnis and Shi'as, the *marja'iyya's* speeches during the 'Ashura rituals focused on the disgrace to Arab honour, a symbolism to which all Arabs in Iraq could relate well and which had no connection to their sectarian identities. Nakash (1994, p. 70) notes that the Shi'a and the Sunni 'have gained confidence by this union whether imaginary or real'. Overall, this coalition succeeded in showing solidarity and resistance; however, the British forces were

ultimately able to crush the 1920 revolt. Despite this, the Iraqi revolt was perceived as a watershed event in contemporary Iraqi history. For the first time, Sunni and Shi'a tribes and cities were brought together in a common effort. However, whilst al-Wardi (1969) acknowledges the Shi'a-Sunni unity and the bravery shown in attempting to defeat the British invasion, at the same time, he doubts that this unity would have continued. In his view, the unity displayed by both the Shi'a and Sunni against the British was unexpected and a rare event that should not be used as mark of precedence, adding that the circumstances that led to this unity are unlikely to be repeated, which thus far has been the case. He rationalises his view on the basis of the two sects inability to compromise or consider the other's point of view, due to the two inherited cultural elements of *al-asabiya* and *al- methaliya*. Al-Wardi (1969) asserts that Iraq can never shed its Bedouin values of *al-asabiya* and *al-methaliya,* because they have become part of its identity.

In summary, when examining events in this period, two major themes were identified. First, the powerful 'Ashura rituals shaped the relationships between the Shi'a of Iraq and the Wahhabis in current day Saudi Arabia. Second and most importantly, is the willingness of Sunni Iraqis to relate to 'Ashura rituals if the right circumstances are in place. After exploring the social outcomes of 'Ashura rituals in Iraq under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, in the following sections, the social outcomes of the rituals under the rule of Sunni-dominated governments (1921-2003) are presented.

4.5.2 The social outcome of 'Ashura rituals between 1921 and 2003

After the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in 1917, the British occupied Iraq and in 1921, they installed Faisal, a Sunni Muslim, as king, providing him with a government that came to be dominated by the Sunni, which alienated the Shi'a (Nakash, 1994, p. 75). As noted earlier, the Sunni domination of power continued to 2003, and during this period, there was a chronic power struggle between the ruling Sunni elite and the Shi'a religious establishment mainly over the vision of Iraqi nationalism. Broadly, the majority of the Shi'a preferred a specifically Iraqi nationalism stressing the tribal and Islamic values of Iraqi society, whereas the Sunni rulers adopted a more secular and a wider Arab nationalism as their ideology, and took Shi'a preference of Iraqi nationalism as proof that the Shi'a did not share their commitment to the ultimate goal of an Arab state (Nakash, 2005, p. 82). Undoubtedly, the Shi'a-Sunni demographics underpinned their competing narratives of Iraqi nationalism. Perhaps the Shi'a majority in Iraq find it

disadvantageous to be part of the overwhelmingly Sunni majority of the Arab world. Haddad, (2020, p. 170) explains that demographic perceptions shape a group sense of its own size and hence the limits of what it can realistically aspire to, fight for or demand. To achieve their desire outcome, both the Shi'a and the Sunni used different methods including the manipulation and the restriction of the commemoration of 'Ashura. Given this research specifically focuses on way the commemoration of 'Ashura interacts with Shi'a-Sunni relations, the discussion pertinent to the social outcomes of restricting the commemoration of 'Ashura is presented into two main categories: the construction of Arab nationalism, and its collapse.

4.5.2.1 Restricting 'Ashura rituals to build the Iraqi nation

According to Nakash (1994, p 158) the exclusion of the Shi'a from power disappointed and alienated them in the forthcoming years and, predictably, this dynamic was reflected in the commemoration of 'Ashura. Nakash (p. 158) argues that "during Muharram emotions and religious fervour ran high. The occasion would highlight Shi'a grievances, and the processions could be transformed by the Shi'a religious establishment into anti-government". In seeking to reduce the effectiveness of the 'Ashura rituals, the Sunni-dominated Iraqi government sought to weaken the authority and influence of the *marja'iyya* and to restrict the practices associated with the rituals (Nakash, 1994, p. 157). In fact, Nakash (p. 81) notes that early as 1923, the king himself became determined to break the power of the *marja'iyya* by forcing them to leave the country. All of this is part of a deliberate effort by the Sunni-dominated governments to contain the Shi'a for the purpose of creating Iraqi territorial nationalism or *wataniyyah al-Iraqia*. This form of nationalism asserts Iraq as a nation and recognises an Iraqi identity as an integral part of Arab identity (Haddad, 2011).

In the meantime, other Arab countries, including Syria and Egypt, were experiencing similar sentiments of defending and protecting their land from foreign influence and imperialism, contributing to the creation of an ideology of Pan-Arabism or Arabism: *qawmiyyah al-Arabia* or ethnic or racial nationalism (Haddad, 2011). Pan-Arabism asserts that the Arabs constitute a single nation, and sought to empower individual Arab states against outside forces by forming alliances. Advocates of Pan-Arabism have often espoused socialist principles and strongly opposed Western political involvement in the Arab world (Franzen, 2011, p. 225).

According to Nakash (1994, p. 134), despite not being a particularly 'Shi'a' form of nationalism, given that the Shi'ism of Iraq was not recognised as part of Iraqi identity, the majority of Shi'a Iraqis embraced Pan-Arabism. It has been argued that a Western style of education, introduced to Iraq by the British in the 1920s, allowed Iraqis, Shi'a and Sunni, to venture beyond their sectarian boundaries (al-Wardi, 1969; Jabar, 2010). Franzen (2011, p. 221) argues that new generations that previously would have been under the sway of their local communities and, if provided with education, would have been recipients of religiously guided teachings, were now being taught 'Arabness' from a near universal curriculum. It is hard to overstress the impact of this phenomenon on a country, which, for centuries, belonged to a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural empire with a multitude of faiths and religious sects and in which 'national identity' was non-existent (Franzen, 2011). The period of 1940s-1960s witnessed the emergence of secular movements including the Iraqi communist Party and the Ba'ath Party. The rise and popularity of secular movements signalled the decrease of religiosity in Iraq and the Arab world generally. Al-Wardi emphasises this argument by pointing out that when religiosity decreased and Arab nationalism sentiment increased in Iraq in the 1950s-60s, 'Ashura rituals lost their intensity and were broadly perceived, particularly amongst the educated and even by the Shi'a themselves, as a backward practice (al-Wardi, 1965, p. 237).

Since 1921 until the Ba'ath Party assumed power in 1968, the Shi'a-Sunni discourse could be characterised as remarkably universalist (Mallat, 1988, p. 705). However, several socio-political elements helped to reverse this relative stability in Shi'a-Sunni dynamics, increasing religiosity in the region and impacting Iraqi nationalism. In particular, these socio-political elements are the rise of the Ba'ath Party in 1968, the rise of Shi'ism in Iran in 1979, and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 (Jabar, 2010; Haddad, 2011), all of which are discussed in the following sections. The aim of the discussion, however, is not to highlight historical context but to contextualise relevant socio-political elements which contributed to the collapse of nationalism and the resurgence of religiosity in Iraq.

4.5.2.2 The collapse of nationalism and the re-emergence of 'Ashura rituals

Due to the authoritarian nature of the Ba'ath Party, along with other socio-political elements including the rise of Shi'ism in Iran (1979) and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (1990), the notion of

nationalism became a meaningless concept in the 1990s, and Iraqi society fragmented, falling along the lines of tribes and sects (Jabar, 2010; Haddad, 2011). In the 1990s, another important development that started to manifest was religious revival and also the revival of ‘Ashura rituals (Jabar, 2020; Haddad, 2011). The increasing division of society along sectarian lines resulted in increasing religiosity that negatively impacted Shi‘a-Sunni relations, which will be discussed in details in the following sections.

The tyrannical style of the Ba‘ath Party rule set the stage for a power struggle with the Shi‘a majority in two ways (Mallat, 1988). First, the secular views of the ruling party collided with the Islamic views of the Shi‘a religious establishment, resulting in the alienation of the Shi‘as in Iraq (Hazran, 2010; Mallat, 1988; Noorbaksh, 2008; Tomass, 2012). Second, the increased representation of Sunnis in the circles of power and consequent exclusion of Shi‘as was interpreted as an attempt to further alienate Shi‘as (Collier, 2007; Devlin, 1991; Mallat, 1988). This alienation by the Ba‘ath Party provoked sectarian sensitivities, as the Shi‘a perceived it as a threat to their identity. Slogans shouted during ‘Ashura rituals against the government at the time indicated the polarisation of Iraqi society, with calls to overthrow the government that were replete with Shi‘a overtones (Jabar, 2020).

As such, one of the first assaults against the Shi‘a at the beginning of Ba‘ath rule was the banning of ‘Ashura rituals, alienating the Shi‘a and leaving them with the feeling that they were not part of this new era of Iraqi nationalism centred on Arabism. Haddad (2011, p. 18) argues that for a political regime, embodied by a man from the opposing Sunni sect, to forbid Shi‘a from commemorating ‘Ashura heightened sectarian tensions by leading Shi‘as to assert their sectarian identity as a challenge to what they undoubtedly saw as a rise in persecution. Haddad (p. 18) adds that “Shi‘a rituals become a mark of protest against those who forbid or disapprove of them”.

It has been reported that in 1977, despite the extreme measures put in place by the Ba‘ath Party to discourage the Shi‘a from commemorating ‘Ashura, the *mujtahid* mobilised the Shi‘a during the processions in Muharram in 1977 to challenge the authority of Ba‘ath rule. Thousands of Shi’a Iraqis turned out to practise the rituals. As a response to the Shi‘a challenge to the ban, government forces attacked the pilgrims, killing and wounding numerous participants. According to a prominent Iraqi scholar, Ibrahim al-Haidari (2006, p. 36), ‘Ali al-Wardi, was troubled by this

incident and wondered about ways to discourage the Shi‘a from commemorating ‘Ashura, or at least to look for alternatives to the commemoration in order to avoid future similar incidents. In response to al-Wardi’s concerns, al-Haidari (2006, p. 36) notes that it is impossible to supress ‘Ashura rituals or even to think about alternatives given that these rituals are ingrained in the Shi‘a collective memory. However, al-Haidari (2006, p. 36) suggests that it may be possible to reduce the intensity of ‘Ashura rituals if social venues, including sports clubs, social clubs, and political platforms were to provide Iraqis, including the Shi‘a, with an alternative opportunities to socialise and discuss their affairs.

In addition to the killing and wounding of numerous participants during ‘Ashura in 1977, a large number of Shi‘a activists were arrested, including a well-regarded and influential Shi‘a *mujtahid*, Muhammad Baqer al-Sadr. In keeping with its dictatorial nature, the regime of Saddam Hussein (1979-2003) eventually took drastic measures following the 1977 Shi‘a protest, executing Muhammad Baqer al-Sadr along with his sister, Bint al-Huda, an act that sent shock waves through the Shi‘a community in Iraq. In that regard, Haddad (2011, p. 18) notes that “one cannot help but wonder if the pre-2003 state’s relations with Iraqi Shi‘as would have been less problematic had the rituals of Muharram not been banned”. Haddad adds that “for someone crying over Husayn or beating his chest, anyone forbidding or disapproving of his actions will be seen as Yazid (the caliph whose army killed Husayn in Karbala)” (Haddad, 2011, p. 18). Irrespective, it could also be argued that tension between Sunni elite and the Shi‘a in Iraq predated the Islamic Revolution in Iran and hence made Saddam Hussein apprehensive.

Jabar (2010, p. 383) argues that the Islamic revolution in 1979 and the subsequent rise of Shi‘ism in Iran exacerbated the tensions between Shi‘a Iraqis and the Iraqi state. This revolution succeeded in reviving Islamic teachings of the Shi‘a’s interpretation of Islam, not only in Iran but also on a regional level (Jabar, p. 383). Most importantly, the leader of the Islamic revolution, Ruhollah Khomeini (1902-1989), placed a heavy emphasis on using the commemoration of ‘Ashura as a powerful means to unite the Shi‘a and defeat their enemies. Since then, the revival of ‘Ashura rituals has become a theme adopted by Shi‘a communities throughout the Middle East and beyond.

The rise of Shi‘ism in Iran was interpreted by the majority of Arabs as a threat to the notion of Arab nationalism, awakening the traditional antagonism between them and the Persians (Pierre,

Hutchinson and Abdulrazak, 2007). This view was embraced and adopted by the regime of Saddam Hussein, which in reaction placed a great emphasis on the Arabism of Iraq (Haddad, 2011; Stansfield, 2016). According to Haddad, one of the first casualties of adopting such a policy were Shi'a Iraqis with an Iranian background. In 1980, fearing that they would act as a fifth column, Saddam expelled them from their homes and deposited them on the Iraqi-Iranian border. This according to Haddad (2011), implied a very narrow understanding of what it means to be an Iraqi, further alienating the Shi'a.

However, the clampdown on the Iraqi Shi'a majority was followed by a calculated attempt by Saddam to try to appease them during the Iraq-Iran war (1980-1988) by stressing *al-wataniyyah* or Iraqi territorial nationalism, in which Arabs were pitted against the eternal enemy: the Persians or Iranians (Jabar, 2010). A historical analogy was made with the Battle of *al-Qadisiyyah* in 636, when the expanding Muslim armies defeated the Sassanians and thus paved the way for the conquest of Persia. The modern war against the Iranians was thus referred to as Saddam's *Qadisiyyat* (Jabar, 2010). This way, Saddam conceptualised the war as the natural outcome of an eternal enmity between Arabs and Persians (Franzen, 2011, p. 230). Not surprisingly, the notion of Iraqi nationalism increased during the Iraq-Iran war (Jabar, 2010; Haddad, 2011). Numerous Iraqis, both Shi'a and Sunni lost their lives in the war believing that they were defending Iraq and the Arabs from Persian expansionist plots in the region (Stansfield, 2016). Most Arab nations supported Saddam in this war, including the Gulf States and Jordan, which recognised him as the defender of Arab nationalism (Stansfield, 2016).

By the end of the war, Iraq was almost financially bankrupt (Jabar, 2010, p. 453). Scholars argue that the resulting that the eight years of fighting did not conclude with either side being able to claim victory (Jabar, 2010; Haddad, 2011, Nasr, 2016). However, what did result was an increase in tension between the regime of Saddam and its allies, the Gulf States and Kuwait in particular (Jabar, 2010). According to Jabar, by the time the Iran-Iraq war ended in 1988, Iraq was not in a financial position to repay the billion of dollars it had borrowed from Kuwait to finance the war, and requested that Kuwait forgive the debt on the grounds that the war had prevented the rise of Iranian hegemony in Kuwait.

Kuwait's reluctance to pardon the debt created strains in the relationship between the two countries, which eventually resulted in its invasion by Iraqi forces in 1990. Consequently, the majority of Arab countries, including Saddam's allies during the Iraq-Iran war, turned against Iraq and welcomed foreign powers to liberate Kuwait, an act that fractured and eventually contributed to the collapse of Arabism. Davis (1993, p. 70), however, argues that Saddam's use of war whether with Iran or his invasion of Kuwait needs to be seen as part of the process of state-building. In Davis's view, given the lack of agreement among the constituent elements of Iraqi society as to the nature of the nation-state after Iraq became a political entity following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Saddam needed war to create a cohesive national identity. Irrespective of Saddam's motive, Haddad (2011, p. 66) notes that in the days following the decimation and defeat of the Iraqi Army during Operation Desert Storm in 1991, the Shi'a in the south and the Kurds in the north of Iraq seized on the weakness of Saddam's armed forces in an attempt to overthrow the Ba'athist regime that had oppressed them for decades. At one point, the Kurdish forces in the north and Shi'a protestors in the south controlled fourteen of Iraq's eighteen provinces, shattering the notion of a united Iraq (Haddad, 2011; Nakash, 1994).

During the Shi'a uprising of 1991, the regime's use of excessive force to quell it further alienated Shi'a Iraqis and aligned them with the Iranians, as Iran was the only country to offer and provide them support. According to Haddad (p. 73), it is ingrained in the memory of Shi'a Iraqis that they did not get support from other Arab nations despite their sacrifice during the Iraq-Iran war, and this further undermined the notion of Arabism. Jabar (2010) argues that the stance taken by the majority of Arab nations offered neither financial nor moral support for Shi'a or Sunni Iraqis during the sanctions imposed on Iraq from 1991 to 2003, further disappointing not only the Shi'a but also Iraqi Sunnis. Both Jabar (2010) and Haddad (2011) argue that Arabism at that point became a meaningless concept and crumbled on all three fronts: the state, and among the Shi'a and the Sunni. Dawisha (2003, p. 25) however, argues that the notion of Arab nationalism had already ended way before Saddam's era, when Arabs lost the Six-day War with Israel in 1967. Dawisha explains that it was not that the Iraqi Ba'athist regime had abandoned its commitment to Arab nationalism. Rather they felt that focusing on Iraq, achieving some form of political harmony, reviving the country's economy, building its infrastructure, and especially solving its ethnic and sectarian problems, was a more urgent priority than a full-fledged charge toward Arab unity

(Dawisha 2003). In any case, the notion of Arab nationalism completely lost its appeal in the 1990s.

Another important development that started to manifest in this period is religious revival (Jabar, 2020; Haddad, 2011). Jabar (2010, p. 462) argues that the regime of Saddam initiated and sponsored a campaign in 1994 known as *al-Hamla al-Imaniya* in order to reinstate Islamic principles and teachings as compensation for the collapse of Arab nationalism. Haddad (2011, p. 104) notes that it is misleading to portray the Ba'ath Party as having been anti-religion prior to 1990. Whilst "secular Arab nationalism was the centre plank of their ideology, Islamic history is central to Arab nationalism and will inevitably form a part of any Iraqi state narrative of the nation-sate" (p. 103). Haddad adds that the regime's religious discourse from the 1990s was simply novel in its intensity and centrality. Furthermore, both Jabar (p. 462) and Haddad (p. 106) argue that what contributed to the revival of religiosity is the series of traumatic events linked to wars and foreign sanctions. Haddad explains that in times of crisis, Iraqis embrace religious practices as a way of coping, which is in line with al-Wardi's (1969) argument about the nature of religiosity and tribalism in Iraq, as discussed in section (3.3).

As already discussed by al-Wardi, increased religious observance tends to lead to increased sectarian tension in Iraq. Indeed, Haddad (2011, p. 111) notes that increased religious observance entails increased sectarian self-identification, and the more Shi'a and Sunni Iraqis identify themselves with their sect, the more visible the differences with the other will be. The revival of religiosity under the rule of Saddam in the 1990s provided the Shi'a religious establishment with a rare opportunity to mobilise Shi'a masses. According to Jabar (2010, p. 461), a noticeable *mujtahid*, Mohammad Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr, became very popular and managed establish a base for himself in Sadr City, a neighbourhood in Baghdad, with millions of followers. Jabar (p. 462) also notes that in 1999, approximately two million Shi'a went to Karbala to commemorate 'Ashura. In this case, however, this was not *mashaya*, processions on foot, rather they used other means of transportation such as buses and cars. Jabar and Nasr (2016) argue that al-Sadr's popularity was perceived as a threat by the authoritarian regime, and indeed in 1999 he was assassinated. Mohammad Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr's son, Muqtada al-Sadr, emerged as the

leader of the Sadrist movement post-2003. He based his legitimacy upon his relationship to his father (Jabar, 2010).

It seems that the revival of religiosity coincided with an attempt to revive tribalism. Indeed, Nakash (2005, p. 97) notes whilst that at the beginning of the Ba‘ath Party rule, and in an attempt to combat any challenges to their authority, tribalism was denounced. Saddam, however, revived tribalism as a strategy for survival that started in the 1980s and especially accelerated following the Gulf War in 1991. The rationale is that after the war, Saddam started to lose control and therefore he wanted the loyalty of the tribal leaders in order to control the rural areas (Nakash, p. 97).

In summary, when the Sunni were dominant in the period from 1921 to 2003, ‘Ashura rituals lost the prominence they enjoyed pre-1921. Instead, a robust notion of Iraqi nationalism developed with Arab identity at its core, and not including Shi‘a symbols. Despite being perceived as essentially a Sunni form of nationalism, the majority of Shi‘a Iraqis embraced it, especially during the 1950s and 1960s, implying a willingness by the Shi‘a to step out of their sectarian zone and unite with Sunni Iraqis to protect their Arab identities. Haddad (2013a, p. 118) notes that prior to 2003, Shi‘a and Sunni coexisted but without breaking down sectarian boundaries. In a way, they were “more than strangers, not often enemies, but less than friends” (p. 118). This changed later for a variety of reasons, including the Ba‘ath Party’s limited view of Iraqi identity (the regime was extremely opposed to mourning processions), the rise of Shi‘ism in Iran, and the collapse of Arabism following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The aforementioned events have contributed to the underscoring of religious and cultural differences between Shi‘a and Sunni Iraqis (Jabar, 2010, p. 10).

Additionally, there was a growing perception by the international community that the regime of Saddam was a security threat, particularly after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (Stansfield, 2016). This perception, coupled with the events of 9/11, provided a strong motive for the U.S. government to initiate action to topple Saddam’s regime. The subsequent success of the U.S. action, in 2003, created an opportunity for the Shi‘a majority in Iraq to assume power.

4.5.3 ‘Ashura rituals and Shi‘a-Sunni relations post-2003: empowering the Shi‘a

Given that Iraqi society has undergone numerous upheavals since 2003, there is no shortage of literature on theories analysing Shi‘a-Sunni relations (Haddad, 2020, 2016, 2014, 2011; Jabar, 2010; Mansour, 2017; Nasr, 2016; Pierre, Hutchinson and Abdulrazak, 2007). In an attempt to explore their relations, scholars adopted different viewpoints including doctrinal differences and competing religious truths, power struggle, the suppression of Shi‘a identity prior to 2003, clashes of symbolism, economic competition, and foreign influence, especially in the context of the Iran-Saudi proxy war (Barzegar , 2008; Jabar, 2010; Haddad, 2020, 2011; Mansour, 2017; Nasr, 2016, 2013; Marechal and Zemni, 2013). However, not all of these theories will be debated here mainly because the theoretical framework of SRT adopted in the thesis does not fit within the macro sociological approach and therefore, a more specific aspects of Shi‘a-Sunni relations is discussed, relating to the ways the commemoration of ‘Ashura interacts with Shi‘a-Sunni relations in Iraq.

Given that the SRT places much emphasises on the power structure of society, a good start to the discussion is, therefore, the changing of power that took place in Iraq in 2003 and its implications. As a result of the US-led invasion of Iraq, the regime of Saddam Hussein (1979-2003), a nationalist who adhered to a Sunni interpretation of Islam, collapsed, and a Shi‘a majority ascended to power for the first time in Iraq’s modern history. Arguments such as the “rising Shi‘a power in Iraq” (Akbarzadeh, 2015, p. 45), “the rise of Shi‘a power in the region” (Haji-Yousefi, 2009, p. 126), “The Shi‘a remain the power-holders in Baghdad” (Mansour, 2017, p. 9), are widely accepted and repeated in the related literature. Haddad (2020), however, does not disagree but he has analysed the concept of Shi‘a power in reference to Shi‘a-Sunni demographics arguing that Shi‘a identity is grounded in a minority mindset and being oppressed and therefore he cautions against projecting the Shi‘a as a powerful group even after they assumed power post 2003.

Haddad (2020, p. 178) argues that regardless of whether the Shi‘a are a majority in a national context, a minority identity is still very much at play given the minority status of Shi‘ism at the doctrinal and the transnational level. According to Haddad’s (p. 321) theoretical framework, sectarian identity is formed, imagined, perceived and practised at four overlapping and interdependent levels: doctrinal, subnational, national, and transnational. At the transitional and the doctrinal levels, Haddad (p. 170) notes, the matter of demographics between the Sunnis and

the Shi‘as is a fairly stable; the spectrum that constitutes Sunni Islam forms an overwhelming majority of between 85-90 percent of self-professed Muslims. Accordingly, the sectarian demographics in Iraq are inherently contradictory because on subnational and national levels, the Shi‘a are the majority, but they are a minority at the doctrinal and the transnational level. A natural corollary of Shi‘ism minority mindset, Haddad adds, is Shi‘a identity’s obsession with victimhood and the construction of a cult of the oppressed. Underscoring these two underlying aspects of the Shi‘a in Iraq post-2003, minority mindset and obsession with victimhood, are crucial because, for example, they explain why the commemoration of ‘Ashura continues to symbolise a rejection to the Sunni dominance even after the Shi‘a assumed power after 2003.

Drawing back to the events that followed the power change in 2003, the immediate reaction to the toppling of the regime manifested in three main ways: celebration, protest and the open commemoration of ‘Ashura. In April 2003, scenes of celebration for the toppling of Saddam were evident in Baghdad, a mixed city of both Shi‘a and Sunni residents. At the same time, in Fallujah, a city with an overwhelming Sunni majority, protests erupted against the American presence (Nasr, 2016). As noted earlier in section 4.2, numerous Shi‘as commemorated ‘Ashura in 2003, which coincided with the toppling of the regime of Saddam Hussein. Jabar (2010, p.25) argues that after the fall of regime, it was like a Shi‘a pandora's box had been opened. During the commemoration of ‘Ashura, Shi‘a crowds hysterically practised self-flagellation whilst chanting “we will never forget Husayn” in processions (Jabar, p. 25). Not surprisingly, most of the resurfaced religious and cultural practices and rituals are a matter largely restricted to the Shi‘a Iraqis and involved little in the way of specifically-Sunni symbols or rituals. It is true that banning the commemoration of ‘Ashura prior to 2003 can explain their powerful re-emergence but, as Haddad (2011) notes, there are no distinguished Sunni rituals, symbols to begin with, whatever Sunni rituals, symbols and narratives that happen to exist, Haddad argues they are perceived in Islamic or national terms, rather than specifically Sunni ones.

It is accepted that at first glance, the Shi‘a perceived the US invasion as liberating, whilst the Sunni perceived it as an occupation (Haddad, 2016). Consequentially, the Sunni started to revolt, directing their attacks at US military forces and the Iraqis who collaborated with them (Haddad, 2016). The Sunnis initially directed their anger at US forces. However, it did not take long for

Sunni insurgents and affiliated groups to widen the scope of their attacks, targeting the Shi‘a as well. According to Haddad (2011), nothing was off-limits as Sunni affiliated terrorist groups targeted places of worship, power and water supply facilities, schools, ministries, government recruitment agencies, checkpoints, local shops, markets, restaurants, and mourning processions. Public mourning processions attracted more attacks because, “the Shi‘a do not know the proper practices of Islam” (Nasr, 2016, p. 19). On March 2, 2004, a series of planned terrorist attacks killed many Shi‘a Iraqis observing ‘Ashura processions, marking it as one of the deadliest Sunni attacks on the Shi‘a (Hoffman, 2006).

One of the major terrorist attacks took place in February of 2006, which targeted al-‘Askari Mosque in the shrine city of Samarra, escalated the tension between Sunni and Shi‘a Iraqis (Haddad, 2013a, p. 115). Samarra is significant for the Shi‘a because it is where the eleventh Imam, Hasan al-‘Askari (846-873) is buried, after being killed by a Sunni caliph, in today’s terminology. Samarra is also the place where al-‘Askari’s son, Muhammad al-Mahdi, the hidden Imam, is believed to have disappeared (Halm, 2004). The attack not only served as a rallying cry for the Shi‘a, but also triggered a mass Shi‘a retaliation (Nasr, 2014). As a result, Haddad (2011, p. 180) argues that the tension escalated to a civil war in which Baghdad became a battleground where massacres and atrocities were committed by both sides (Haddad, 2011, p. 181). The 2006 attack, however, did not deter the Shi‘a from commemorating ‘Ashura. In fact, according to Pierre, Hutchinson and Abdulrazak (2007), a million Shi‘a Iraqis commemorated ‘Ashura in Karbala in 2007. The pattern has become clear here, the increased frequency of attacks on the Shi‘a, correlated with more participation in the commemoration of ‘Ashura because these attacks appear to fuel the Shi‘a sense of victimhood, easily manifesting in the commemoration. In fact, Mansour (2017, p. 6) argues that Iraq’s post-2003 political leadership, from within the Shi‘a community, relied on a socially constructed history of victimhood to unify against the ‘other’.

On the Shi‘a retaliation for al-‘Askari Mosque’s attack, Haddad (2011, p. 17) explains that the existence, status and security of a group depends on the status of the group symbols, which is why people are willing to fight and die for them, and why they are even willing to follow leaders who manipulate those symbols for dubious or selfish purposes. For the Shi‘a, as has already been established, the most sacred symbols are their Imams. Thus, the attack on the al-‘Askari Mosque

in 2006 signified an attack on a Shi‘a symbol, an act that evoked the memory of the Battle of Karbala and the killing of Husayn. Therefore, the Shi‘a retaliated against the Sunni. Despite some de-escalation of violence by mid-2007, civilian deaths from both sects steadily rose to reach an astonishing high of three thousand, one hundred and fifty-nine by July 2006 (Haddad, 2013, p. 115).

Between 2008 and 2010, and under the rule of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki (2006-2014), Shi‘a militias managed to successfully quell most of the Sunni dissent (Nasr, 2014). According to Khoei (2019, p. 102), al-Maliki viewed the Middle East through a sectarian lens, noting that for him “there are two main axes here in the Middle East: Sunni and Shiite [Shi‘a]”. With the Sunni insurgents defeated, the notion of stability seemed possible, but was shattered due to the rise of ISIS and their swift occupation of almost one third of Iraqi territory by the end of 2014 (Mansour, 2017, p. 6). Brands and Feaver (2017, p. 14) and Schmid (2015, p. 1) are not surprised about the emergence of extremist groups such as ISIS attributing their rise to state failure, civil war, and the repression of Sunnis by the Shi‘a militias and governments, especially the government of Nouri al-Maliki.

Within ISIS’s ideology, the Shi‘a Muslims are regarded as infidels and, therefore, must be exterminated (Wood, 2015). With a further threat made by this group to capture not only Baghdad but also the shrine cities, the Grand Ayatullah, or ‘sign of God’, a title granted to a high ranking *marja‘*, ‘Ali al-Sistani, issued a *fatwa*. In his *fatwa*, the Ayatullah called on all Iraqis to help repel the ISIS threat, which immediately mobilised tens of thousands of Shi‘a volunteers to form what has become known as *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi* or Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in 2014. Although the overwhelming majority of the volunteers were Shi‘a Iraqis, some Sunni and Christian Iraqis joined the PMF (Abbas, 2017). According to Mansour and Jabar (2017, p. 1), the PMF became the largest organisation outside direct government control, with over 60,000 fighters who stepped in to secure Iraq after state forces collapsed in 2014. The group has helped successfully to liberate most of Iraq’s Sunni dominated towns and cities from the threat of ISIS since it was formed (Mansour and Jabar, 2017, p. 3).

According to Abbas (2017, p. 6), the PMF is not a monolith by any stretch of the imagination. It is directly linked to the Shi‘a religious establishment, both in Iraq or Iran. According to Mansour

and Jabar (2017, p.1), *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* contains three distinct factions, based on various subgroups' respective allegiances to 'Ali Khamenei (the supreme *marja'* of Iran), 'Ali al-Sistani (the supreme *marja'* in Iraq), and Muqtada al-Sadr (a populist Shi'a religious leader). The narrative of Karbala seems to form the basic foundation of *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi*, which is evident in the names given to the different subgroups within these forces, and also in the fact that the '*atabat* (Holy Shrines) administrations formed armed militias to join the fighting against ISIS under the umbrella of *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* (al-Qarawee, 2019, p. 495). Unsurprisingly, the Shi'a religious establishment adopted the battle of Karbala as their main narrative to fight ISIS. Among its militias, for example, were the 'Ali Al-Akbar Brigade, named after Husayn's oldest son who was killed in Karbala, and formed and funded by the administration of the Imam Hussein Shrine and the Abbas Brigade, named after Husayn's step-brother and affiliated with the administration of the Abbas Shrine (al-Qarawee, 2019, p. 495).

Once again, and despite the threat from ISIS, numbers of Shi'a commemorating 'Ashura seem to be on the rise, especially for *ziyarat al-Arba'in*. According to Chatelard (2017, p. 3), for the November 2016 event, the shrine of Imam Husayn publicised a figure of over 20 million visitors. Abbas (2017, p. 7) argues that the Shi'a religious establishment in control of the two shrines in Karbala have adopted many austerity measures to be able to fund their own *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* factions whose primary responsibility is to strengthen the defenses of the two holy cities to ensure safety of pilgrims and also support anti-ISIS campaigns in neighboring provinces. The fact that more pilgrims now visit Karbala on the occasion of *al-Arba'in* every year (estimated to be between 17 to 20 million) than those who perform *hajj* (around 1.5 million) explains the nature of the gigantic task (Abbas, p. 7). For the Iraqi Shi'a, as al-Khoei (2019) notes, *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* are heroes who are standing up to the divisive forces that wish ill to Iraq and are enabling the Shi'a Muslims to keep alive their great pilgrimage tradition.

It has been acknowledged that *al-Hashd* "has played a crucial role in not just preventing further ISIS advances in 2014 but also in supporting the Iraqi Army in the military campaigns to take back control of the ISIS-occupied cities of Tikrit in 2015, Ramadi in 2016 and finally Mosul in 2017" (al-Khoei, 2019, p. 108). The Sunni, however, have different views about *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi*. Abbas (2017, p. 9) argues that:

> Iraq's Sunnis mostly look at the Hashd [*al-Hashd al-Sha'bi*] as a Shia [Shi'a] force, which seeks to expand Shia [Shi'a] influence in Iraq. Sectarianism as well as politics play a crucial part in this assessment but it is human rights violations committed during some Hashd [*al-Hashd al-Sha'bi*] operations that provide substance to the genuine Sunni concerns. Some of the Hashd [*al-Hashd al-Sha'bi*]excesses might indeed be inspired by revenge. In other cases, the Hashd [*al-Hashd al-Sha'bi*] argue that many of the Sunnis they targeted were secretly supporting Daesh [ISIS].

In defending the decision to form *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi*, al-Khoei (2019, p. 102) argues that "Ayatollah Sistani was dismayed by how regional and international media interpreted the *fatwa* as a Shia [Shi'a] call to arms against Sunnis, reaffrming that his call was directed at all Iraqi citizens to join state security forces". Al-Khoei (p. 102) adds that al-Sistani warns "that ISIS was a threat to all Iraqis and that the holy places mentioned in the *fatwa* was not just a reference to Shia [Shi'a] shrines but Sunni mosques, Christian churches and other religious places of worship too". Irrespective of the Sunni view of *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi*, by creating these forces, the Shi'a religious establishment represented by 'Ali al-Sistani is accredited for defeating ISIS and securing *ziyarat al-Arba'in* during one of the most dangerous periods in post-2003 Iraq.

It is well argued that religious establishment can influence pilgrims' motivations to visit holy places by fueling them with ideological interpretation of religious texts and collective narratives (Terzidou, Scarles, & Saunders, 2018). Nevertheless, as Nikjoo, Razavizadeh, and Di Giovine (2020, p. 3) argue motives for pilgrimage cannot be simply referred to as institutionally constructed external factors. They (p. 18) find that "the countless number of Shi'a pilgrims on the routes to Karbala also provoked a unifying sense of power, and demonstrating this power to ISIS and other Sunni extremists seemed very important to pilgrims". For Abbas (2017, p. 7), the Shi'a pilgrims risking their lives for *ziyarat al-Arba'in* can be linked to the oppression that they have suffered historically. According to Abbas (p. 7), "Shia [Shi'a] are generally very sensitive – at times overly sensitive – regarding these religious commemorations and various rituals. Under Saddam Hussein, the commemoration of Shia [Shi'a] holidays was banned – and many Arab states still strictly discourage or disallow public commemoration of Shia holidays". Whether motivated by terrorist attacks or simply traditions and religious beliefs, the Shi'a symbols and practices including the mourning rituals of 'Ashura have become dominate feature of Iraq post-2003. Haddad (2016, p. 4), however, sees all of this as a strategic attempt to build a Shi'a-centric state in Iraq.

It seems that struggle over what constitute Iraqi nationalism or what defines Iraq, is not only a feature of pre-2003 but the struggle continued after 2003. Mansour (2017, p. 6) argues that the disintegration of the unitary Iraqi state after 2003 has given rise to a perpetual struggle for power and state identity, with rivalrous factions – in the form of non-state or social groupings – competing for control or influence in a complex power-balancing exercise. In that regard, with the Shi‘a having the upper hand, Haddad (2016, p. 4) frames the Shi‘a-Sunni dynamics as a “Shi‘a-centric state Building and Sunni rejection”. However, this is not to confuse the Shi‘a-centric state or the notion of a Shi‘a state in Iraq with the Iranian model of a Shi‘a state, where a Shi’a cleric must fill the highest political position in the country, a doctrine that is known as the guardianship of the jurist (Corboz, 2017, p. 10). For Haddad, Shi‘a-centric state building involves ensuring that the central levers of the state are in Shi‘a hands and that Shi‘a identities are represented and empowered. This could range from allowing, or even encouraging, Shi‘a symbolism in public spaces to incorporating the Shi‘a calendar into the national calendar for events and holidays, all the way to attempting to endow the state with a Shi‘a identity. To provide some examples, Haddad (p. 23) argues that after 2003, streets, neighbourhoods and landmarks were renamed and new official and unofficial national holidays were introduced to reflect Shi‘a symbolism. Many scholars share Haddad’s understanding of a Shi‘a state in Iraq - the dominance of Shi‘a symbols and practices but without granting an official political status for the *marja‘iyya* - including Nasr (2016, p. 185) who dedicated a chapter *The First Arab Shia [Shi‘a] State* in his book *The Shia [Shi‘a] revival* .

Within the context of Shi‘a-centric state building, whilst Haddad generally identifies Shi‘a symbols in post-2003 Iraq, Pierre, Hutchinson and Abdulrazak (2007) are specific about using the episode of Karbala to define the state. It is true that the commemoration of ‘Ashura started to capture the attention of scholars but the discussion remines with the scope of Shi‘a’s rights to their practices (Jabar, 2010; Nakash, 2005; Nasr, 2016). Within the scant discussion about the implications of the commemoration beyond the Shi‘a themselves, Pierre, Hutchinson and Abdulrazak (2007) argue that ‘Ashura rituals have made Shi‘a Islam “a convenient state-builder” (p. 65). They argue that the commemoration of ‘Ashura can claim the ‘cultural ownership’ of Iraq given its dominance, and this facilitates the establishment of a Shi‘a state. They argue that the symbols of ‘Ashura, with their vibrant display in processions, are used by the Shi‘a religious

establishment to trigger theocratic zeal. In this narrative, the Shi‘a faithful, drawn by the pious language of ‘Ashura, can be mobilised for a righteous struggle (Pierre, Hutchinson and Abdulrazak, p. 65). Pierre, Hutchinson and Abdulrazak (p. 65) add that this was also true during the Iranian revolution in 1979. In other words, Pierre, Hutchinson and Abdulrazak do not suggest that using ‘Ashura rituals to facilitate the establishment of a Shi‘a state in Iraq is a thermotic concept emerging from a historical episode of particular virulence and passion. For the Shi‘a, the moral allegory of the battle of Karbala has developed into a cultural fixation, the ‘Ashura complex, that colours all part of Shi‘a political life (p. 65). Pierre, Hutchinson and Abdulrazak add that the ability of the Iraqi Shi‘a political parties to mobilise Shi‘a masses in multiple electoral events is emblematic of the ‘Ashura complex.

As for Sunnis, Pierre, Hutchinson and Abdulrazak (2007) anticipated challenges, especially as some of their religious practices clash with Shi‘a practices, as stated earlier. Haddad (2014, p. 15) argues that the Sunni rejected the occupation, regime change, and the empowerment of the Shi‘a and the dominance of their symbols and practices. Haddad (2020) notes that it is true that their rejection started with the US led invasion and continues in various forms but after almost 15 years since the invasion of Iraq, their views started to soften. Haddad (2020, p. 312) observes that there are signs of broader acceptance and normalisation of Shi‘a practices and traditions. Haddad (p. 310) explains that with passing time, the Sunnis got accustomed to Shi‘a practices in the sense that they are not agitated by them in comparison to the early years that followed the regime change in 2003. Mansour (2017. p. 3), however, is pessimistic about the outcome of the struggle over what defines Iraq, especially with very little accommodation for the Sunnis, For Mansour, the outcome is basically a repeat of cycles of failure and repair.

In summary, since the US invasion of Iraq, the discussion regarding Shi‘a-Sunni relations is still pertinent due to their complicated nature. Influencing factors discussed include sectarian government policies, Western imperialism, terrorism and regional foreign influence; however, little has been previously discussed about the roles of cultural elements, in particular the impact of ‘Ashura rituals on Shi‘a-Sunni relations, which will be explored in depth in the following chapters.

4.6 Chapter summary

In this chapter, the related literature to ‘Ashura rituals was examined and discussed from the perspective of the theoretical framework used in this thesis. First, I discussed the way different types of ‘Ashura rituals spread on intra and inter-levels. Then, I examined the strength of ‘Ashura rituals and the ways they have been used strategically by the Shi‘a religious establishment. Throughout the discussion, I emphasised that ‘context’ is crucial to the understanding of the dominance of rituals and their strategic uses. Second, I explored the symbolic meanings of ‘Ashura rituals. In that regard, the literature review demonstrates that ‘Ashura rituals have expressed themes including rejection of Sunni hegemony, political activism, and group identity, whilst emphasising the ambiguity and different interpretations of these symbolisms.

In the final sections of this Chapter, the manner in which ‘Ashura rituals have shaped Shi‘a-Sunni relations, were presented. In these sections, the discussion has focused on the fourth concept of SRT, the social outcomes of commemorating the killing of Husayn. In that regard, the literature shows that ‘Ashura rituals played a crucial role in contributing to the rise of Wahhabism, converting Sunni tribes to Shi‘ism in the nineteenth century, from which they became strengthened, as well as being strategically used as a platform to unite the Shi‘a and Sunni during the 1920 Iraq Revolt.

When reflecting on the events of the period 1921 to 2003, it is clear that ‘Ashura rituals lost the power and prominence that they enjoyed pre-1921. Instead, a robust notion of Iraqi nationalism developed with Arab identity at its core, but not including Shi‘a symbols. However, this changed for a variety of reasons, including the Ba‘ath Party’s limited view of Iraqi identity, the rise of Shi‘ism in Iran in 1979, and the collapse of Arabism due to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. The aforementioned events have contributed to underscoring religious and cultural differences between Shi‘a and Sunni Iraqis. In post-2003 Iraq, despite the increasing tension between the Shi‘a and Sunni, limited discussion was found in the literature regarding the role of ‘Ashura rituals on the dynamics of these relations. Within this limited discussion, it has been broadly argued that ‘Ashura rituals could help facilitate the establishment of a Shi‘a state in Iraq. Finally, it is important to note that the relevance of all the concepts reviewed for this study were taken into consideration. In the following chapter, a more detailed approach to the research methodology is discussed.

5 Methods and strategies of data collection

This thesis, which employs a qualitative research methodology, sets out to explore the impact of ‘Ashura rituals on social relations between Shi‘a and Sunni Iraqis. Whilst taking into consideration arguments presented in the previous chapters, it aims at complementing and enriching them by defining a methodological approach that is suitable for this thesis. The discussion in this chapter commences by introducing the thesis approach, and then by presenting the rationale for using a qualitative perspective. After that, three main aspects are discussed: research methodology, purposeful sampling of research participants, and critical reflection of the researcher’s views and background.

5.1 Thesis approach

In order to illustrate and contribute to the previous theoretical chapters, the matter under investigation in this thesis is a case study based on the ritualised practices associated with *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* as observed by the researcher in November/December of 2016 in Karbala, Najaf, and Baghdad. According to Stake (1995), case study research is an investigation and analysis of a single or collective case, intended to capture the complexity of the object of the study. In contrast to experimental designs, which seek to test a specific hypothesis through deliberately manipulating the environment, the case study approach lends itself well to capturing information on more explanatory ‘how’, ’what’ and ‘why’ questions.

A “case” is defined by Miles and Huberman (1994) as “a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context” (p. 25). Whilst taking all of the mourning rituals of ‘Ashura into account, based on the theoretical framework of SRT, this thesis will focus on *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*, because, since the fall of the regime of Saddam Hussein in 2003, it has become one of the main powerful and visible mourning rituals (Al-Hilli, 2017). The main ritualised practices of *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* consist of the following elements: walking (*mashaya*) to Karbala, serving the visitors (*mawakib al-Khidmah),* visiting Husayn and Abbas shrines on the day of the fortieth, numerous *mawakib* (processions) of *al-‘Aza* (mourning), *latum* (chest beating), and *zangeel* (back beating with chains). Millions of Shi‘a walkers (*mashaya*) set out on journeys from different Iraqi cities and villages and head for Karbala to visit the shrine of Imam Husayn on the day of the fortieth (al-Hilli, 2017).

Al-Hilli explains that the rationale for not using other means of transport is that "the more effort a believer places in the deed and the more difficult it is to accomplish it, the greater the blessing from Almighty" (p. 63). Al-Hilli (p. 89) describes the *mashaya* as the single largest annual peaceful gathering in the world, where swarms of people walk united to pay allegiance to their Imam, Husayn, who left an everlasting legacy 1400 years ago. In contrast to other rituals, walking to Karbala draws men and women of all ages and from different nationalities including but not limited to Iranians, Bahrainis and Lebanese (al-Hilli, 2017, p. 9). The diversity of participants enriches the analysis which is another reason for observing *ziyarat al-Arba'in* in Karbala.

In addition to introducing the case, Miles and Huberman (1994) argue that the case study approach involves collecting the data, and conducting the analysis. Guided by the four theoretical aspects of SRT, the strength of rituals, their strategic use, symbolic meanings of rituals, and social outcomes, the methods used to collect and analyse data are qualitative observation, content analysis, survey, and interviews. Qualitative observation, whereby the researcher interacts with people in 'real world settings' whilst collecting information, is a unique method for investigating the experiences, and activities of human beings (Jorgensen, 2015, p. 1). Content analysis is a method that allows researchers to make specific inferences from text, social media, and all sorts of recorded communication (transcripts of interviews, discourses, and video tapes) (Mayring, 2004, p. 160). The third method of data collection, individual interviews, has been adopted because it provides researchers the opportunity to explore participants' experiences and views on certain issues by asking them questions face-to-face and engaging with them in a meaningful way (Talmy, 2010, p. 128). These methods are appropriate when the researcher "cannot manipulate the behaviour of those involved in the study" (Baxter and Jack, 2008, p. 545), which is something that this study obviously aims to respect.

5.2 Rationale for using qualitative approach

This research, as explained in the previous introduction, employs therefore a qualitative research methodology to answer the main research question and sub questions, the main research question being: "How has the annual commemoration of 'Ashura affected, shaped and informed Shi'a-Sunni current relations in Iraq?"

The reason for choosing a qualitative approach for this research is best explained by Dickson-Swift et al. (2007) who noted that this approach "is exploratory in nature, thus enabling researchers to gain information about an area in which little is known" (p. 329).

It is also adopted because as Dickson-Swift et al. (2007) indicate, as qualitative researchers, "we go into other people's lives, sometimes at the time of crises and stress, and we ask them to talk in details about their experiences" (p. 329). This aspect of qualitative approach is also relevant to the main topic of this thesis given that since 2003, Shi'a and Sunni Iraqis experienced periods of tense relations. Furthermore, one of the advantages of qualitative methods is to enhance the researcher's capacity not only to describe events but to understand how and why the same events are often interpreted in a different, sometimes even conflicting manner, by different stakeholders (Sofaer, 1999, p. 1106). This is advantageous for data analysis given, as discussed previously, the divergent views of 'Ashura rituals.

Leedy and Ormrod (2010) further explain that qualitative methodologies focus on phenomena that occur in natural settings, that is, in the "real world" (p. 135). This aspect of qualitative methods in exploring an issue in a real-world setting as opposed to manipulating variables within the environment of the phenomena under investigation is important and relevant to this research study because, as stated earlier, 'context' is crucial when it comes to exploring 'Ashura rituals. This approach is important because this research goes beyond the static understating of the 'Ashura, typically understood only within the concept of commemorating the death of an Imam, to explore the symbolism in the rituals, their meanings, and consequences. Accordingly, the symbolic meanings expressed by 'Ashura rituals in light of the current circumstances and reality of ISIS, as well as the proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia, differ from the existing circumstances when Saddam Hussein was in power when the rituals were banned. Overall, a qualitative approach is best suited to the nature of this research as outlined above, and will be adopted in all previously mentioned methods of data collection and analysis (observation, content analysis and interviews). There are two main challenges, however, associated with this approach: the subjectivity involved in choosing the research participants and, perhaps most importantly, the way the data is interpreted.

To counter the notion of subjectivity and in order to produce a convincing account throughout the research, three elements were taken into consideration: triangulation, purposeful sampling, and reflexivity (Berger, 2015; Cooper and Endacott, 2007). Triangulation is the approach to data collection by which evidence is deliberately sought from a wide range of different, independent sources (Cooper and Endacott, 2007). Purposeful sampling is the process of selecting participants of different backgrounds and perspectives in an effort to maximise the depth and richness of data to address the research question (Cooper and Endacott, 2007). Finally, according to Berger (2015, p. 219), reflexivity, which is a process of critical reflection on the researcher's beliefs and assumptions separating them from the research result, is crucial to minimise subjectivity and bias.

In summary, the reasons for adopting a qualitative approach are because it enables researchers to gain valuable information about the matter under investigation, explore participants' views and experiences on the matter even in a context where there are conflicting views, without manipulating the environment. To ensure objectivity of approach, three elements are incorporated in the process; triangulation, purposeful sampling, and reflexivity, all of which will be explained in detail in the following sections.

5.3 Research methodology: Triangulation

Flick (2004, p. 178) notes that triangulation demands data drawn from different sources and at different times, in different places and from different people. To satisfy the element of triangulation, the data collection and analysis were comprised of three stages. In the first stage, as the primary researcher, I conducted content analysis of materials related to 'Ashura rituals and observed *ziyarat al-Arba'in* in Karbala. The data analysis reflected the researcher's own views. To ensure that issues of bias and subjectivity were dealt with throughout the project, the themes that emerged from the first stage were validated in the next stage. In the second stage, I conducted interviews and a survey with Shi'a and Sunni Iraqis. The data analysis was based on the views and perspectives of the research participants. Similarly, themes that emerged from stage two were clarified and validated in stage three, where I conducted additional interviews with Shi'a and Sunni key informants. The final analysis of data was based on their perspectives and feedback about my own interpretation of data in the first stage and the views of Shi'a and Sunni Iraqis that emerged in the second stage. The use of triangulation in this thesis, therefore, is relevant not only to all

research methods (observation, content analysis and interviews), but also to the different stages of the research, the order in which they are conducted and the links that can be established between them. Overall, the idea behind the multiple stage design was to ensure that the themes which emerged from this research were well discussed and argued.

Drawing on the SRT framework, the overall aim of conducting data analysis was to explore the rituals' strength, based on factors of salience, homologous-ness, repetitiveness, and resources; their strategic use; the symbolic meanings embedded in the rituals; and the implications for social relations (social outcomes). Themes that emerged from the data analysis of these stages were organised into four categories: ritual strength, their strategic use, symbolic meanings of rituals, and social outcomes.

Finally, the methodology adopted in this study aligns with the data collection strategies of Knottnerus (1997) in terms of the use of multiple approaches. Knottnerus argues that the use of dissimilar methods of data collection increases the trustworthiness of the research particularly when they produce similar findings. After all, a multi-method approach is a common practice within qualitative research as each method can bring a particular insight to a study (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). In the following sections, detailed discussions of the three stages of data analysis are presented.

5.3.1 Stage one: Observation and content analysis

In this stage, I started by conducting content analysis to outline contemporary 'Ashura rituals focusing on Karbala, given its significance as a hub for the commemoration of 'Ashura. After all, it is the burial place of Husayn and where the battle of Karbala took place in 680. Mapping out contemporary 'Ashura rituals also benefited from my observation of the ritualised practices of *ziyarat al-Arba'in* in Karbala, 2016. It is true that previous chapters provided important discussions about 'Ashura rituals, but they were not relatively up to date. As discussed in the theoretical framework, rituals are not static as they constantly interact with socio-political elements of society. Subsequently, content analysis of materials related to all 'Ashura rituals along with observation of *ziyarat al-Arba'in* was conducted to explore the strength of 'Ashura rituals, their strategic use, symbolic meanings of the rituals, and social outcomes. It was important to observe in real time the commemoration, *ziyarat al-Arba'in*, and also to witness the behaviours of people at the time of

the commemoration. In addition, it was important to listen to peoples' stories and reactions during and after the commemoration. Themes resulted from this stage are organised in four categories: strength of rituals, strategic use of rituals, symbolic meanings of rituals, and social outcomes. In the following sections, the two methods adopted in this stage, content analysis and observation, are discussed.

5.3.1.1 Qualitative content analysis

The aim of conducting content analysis is twofold: to outline the contemporary form of 'Ashura rituals in Iraq, their sequence, places, and estimated number of participants, and to explore the strength of 'Ashura rituals, their strategic use, symbolic meanings of the rituals, and social outcomes. Qualitative content analysis was utilised because as Bryman (2001, p. 179) argues, it is widely used by researchers in the field of cultural studies and also because it is a flexible method, in that it can be applied to both the textual and visual content of online materials, the main source of information at this stage. Bryman (2001) adds that it also enables the analysis of very large samples, which is a useful feature in analysing data for this research given the numerous materials available on 'Ashura rituals and on Shi'a-Sunni relations, whether on social media (especially Twitter), online video clips, and websites, including the official websites of religious leaders. As Anthonsen (2003, p. 189) explains, content analysis provides the required tools when "the ambition is to analyse thousands of communication units in a meaningful way". Meanwhile, other types of communication analysis are neither practically applicable, nor consistent with such ambition (Anthonsen, 2003, p. 189).

Furthermore, qualitative content analysis is an especially helpful tool in revealing patterns in Iraqi newspapers and magazines, social media, especially Twitter (Maeshima, 2007, p. 16). Social media may be defined as websites or other internet-based services where the content being communicated is created by the people who use the service (Branthwaite and Patterson, 2011). This research found that using content analysis in exploring social media, particularly relevant websites of *mujtahids* and Shi'a TV satellite channels, together with Twitter accounts (see Appendix 5), was very beneficial for collecting data given people's tendency to be more open and explicit about their views online than in interviews (Cummings, Kohn, and Hulley, 2013; Mitra, Evansluong, and Diedrich, 2019).

As the primary researcher, I found that ‘Ashura rituals generate massive discussions on Twitter given that it has become an effective tool for people of all opinions to express their views. According to Bruns and Burgess (2011, p1), as the use of Twitter has become more commonplace throughout many nations, its role in providing a platform for discussion has increased ranging from general political comments to protests and other activist mobilisation, for example, in the Arab world (Bruns and Burgess, p. 1).

Furthermore, Bruns and Burgess argue that research into the use of Twitter in different contexts has also developed rapidly, aided by substantial advancements in quantitative and qualitative methodologies for capturing, processing, analysing, and visualising Twitter updates by large groups of users. They explain that recent work has especially highlighted the role of the Twitter hashtag, a short keyword, prefixed with the hash symbol ‘#’, as a means of coordinating a distributed discussion between more or less large groups of users, who do not need to be connected through existing ‘follower’ networks. Senders include hashtags in their messages to mark them as addressing particular themes (Bruns and Burgess, p. 2). The popularity of Twitter, however, as argued by Ersahin et al. (2017, p. 388), has led to different problems including the possibility of exposing incorrect information to their users through fake accounts which results to the spread of malicious content. To circumvent this pitfall, I followed their advice of detecting a fake account by checking some features including number of tweets, friends, issues discussed, and when the account is started (Ersahin et al., 2017, p. 388). Overall, after assessing the pros and cons of using Twitter, conducting content analysis of discussion and views expressed on Twitter is therefore a valuable method for collecting data and is adopted in this thesis.

Moving the discussion to how content analysis works, Scheufele (2008, p. 431) argues that it “works inductively by summarizing and classifying elements or parts of the text material and assigning labels or categories to them”. Bruns and Burgess (2011) explain that content analysis is carried out by developing content categories through a set of explicit rules of coding. The rules of coding were then systematically applied to the material being analysed. A similar strategy was used in this study, where concepts emerged from the analysis were grouped into the four theoretical categories of the SRT, the strength of ‘Ashura rituals, their strategic use, symbolic meanings of the rituals, and the social outcomes, to produce relevant information vis-à-vis the research

questions at hand. Wilkinson and Birmingham, (2003, p. 76) argue that, by using content analysis, themes and issues can be determined through a qualitative, more holistic, approach rather than employing statistical techniques.

Another advantage of content analysis is that it is a transparent research method, enabling replication and follow-up studies, which is in line with this thesis's approach of reducing subjectivity. It is due to this transparency in procedures that content analysis is often described as an objective research method (Bryman, 2001, p. 189). The purpose of the transparent and systematic research method is to remove the possibility of any personal biases from influencing the findings (Bryman, 2001, p. 178).

Overall, the content analysis carried out in this study is of qualitative nature, involving the interpretations of various elements relevant to the SRT framework. It is worth noting that quantitative content analysis as a research method suffers from some limitations. One such limitation is that while it may reveal certain patterns in media coverage, it rarely answers the question of why such patterns occur (Bryman, 2001, p. 191). Consequently, other methods such as observation and interviews are required to provide explanation for themes gathered from content analysis.

5.3.1.2 Observation

Similar to content analysis, the aim of conducting observation of *ziyarat al-Arba'in* was to outline the contemporary form of rituals involved and to explore the rituals' strength, their strategic use, their symbolic meanings and their social outcomes. Observation as a method of data collection is important for understanding peoples' actions, roles and behaviours (Walshe, Ewing, & Griffiths, 2011). It is a qualitative data collection technique that is widely used by researchers who employ SRT to explore the impacts of ritualised practices on social relations (Edwards & Knottnerus, 2010; Guan & Knottnerus, 1999; Sen & Knottnerus, 2016).

Observation of the rituals of *ziyarat al-Arba'in* has been used as the primary method of data collection, by gathering in-depth data without attempting to manipulate or change the social dynamics (the setting) involved. Patton (1990) suggests that observation allows researchers to unveil the complexities of a group's social reality and its interaction with other groups. Knottnerus

(2012) argues that this method of data collection broadens the perspective of researchers, allowing them to gather evidence that would not have been possible with other methods, such as interviews and/or content analysis. My observation of the rituals of *ziyarat al-Arba'in* took place in Karbala from the 16th to the 22nd of November 2016, covering the journey from Baghdad to Karbala on the 16th; the period spent in Karbala, including the day of *al-Arba'in*, which coincided with the 21st of November, and the journey back from Karbala to Baghdad on the 22nd of November. In Karbala, I stayed in a three-story house owned by a family, who knew my parents. The house has two separate entrances and is divided into two sections: one section for men and the other for women and children. The family hosted many relatives, friends of the family, and even people they did not know. In Karbala, it is common, and even regarded as an honor, for people to host visitors participating in the commemoration of 'Ashura, and to offer them places to sleep and food. The 'men's' section of the house hosted about 100 individuals. The family prepared mattresses, so people could sleep on the floor. In the morning, people lifted up their mattresses and put them aside. With the help of relatives and friends, the family prepared food outside, in their backyard, and sometimes on the street. People socialised, discussed current events whilst preparing food, which as a researcher conducting fieldwork greatly benefited me by allowing me to listen to their views and discussions. Whilst in Karbala, I attended ten memorial services hosted by locals in their homes and public memorial services sponsored by tribal leaders and community members held around the shrines of Imam Husayn and Abbas.

As a researcher, I managed to gain valuable data through observing the rituals of *al-Arba'in* in Karbala, all of which I documented in a journal. Additionally, I collected material related to these rituals, including numerous video recordings and photos on the way to Karbala: processions of service, rituals performed inside the shrine, memorial services and mourning processions, some stories and poems used in the rituals and the cooking and serving of food to visitors. It is worth noting that, generally, participants were made aware that I was conducting research concerning these rituals. It is also important to note that, as a researcher, I am fully aware of the element of subjectivity that could come into play and undermine some of the observations presented in this research. However, in the broader context of this research, other methods of data collection and triangulation were used to validate the findings and themes, which emerged from my observation of the rituals of *ziyarat al-Arba'in* in Karbala.

When it comes to the analysis of the observation, Fibiger (2010, p. 30) argues that what we see in the field, and how we see and understand it, depends on the people whom we meet, the information that they share with us, and the events that we experience together. Likewise, Kapferer (2003) notes how his own interpretation of the Suniyama ritual in Sri Lanka is based on "discussions with the specialists and lay participants" (p. 110) and how "[n]o description can stand outside interpretation" (p. 110). Based on this, Fibiger (2010) argues that "rather than aiming at a neutral description or analysis from the ethnographer's desk, I shall include various analyses as they have been related to me by different field participants" (p. 30), an approach that has been adopted in this study. Fibiger concludes that "The researcher is not alone in doing analyses; event analyses are being conducted constantly by, and with, our informants in the field" (p. 30).

In order to make sense of data (information and views on social media, information from the fieldwork along with notes, the video recordings and photos of the rituals) which was collected from both observation and content analysis, the information was organised into four main categories which reflect the core principles of SRT: the strength of 'Ashura rituals, their strategic use, symbolic meanings of rituals, and social outcomes. At this stage, open coding was very useful to identify first level concepts and themes (Khandkar, 2009; Priest, Roberts, and Woods, 2002). According to Priest, Roberts, and Woods (2002, p. 33) whilst this process is underway, the analyst will ask questions of the data, such as: What is the basis for this point of view? Do other participants hold similar beliefs? Is there a specific theme or concept to which this issue relates? It is questioning of this nature that leads to new discoveries being made in the process of collecting and analysis data. This process is characteristic of the constant comparative method described by Glaser (2008). When I present my data analysis, observations will be referenced as 'field notes, Karbala, November, 2016'. The overall aim of this stage of analysis is to identify concepts relevant to the research questions, which have formed the basic units of analysis for the following stages.

5.3.2 Stage two: interviews and survey

In the second stage of the research, a total of twenty two interviews with Shi'a and Sunni Iraqis, residing in Iraq or in the UK, and a survey with fifty-three Shi'a and Sunni Iraqis, residing in Iraq or in the UK, were conducted. The aim of this research stage is to obtain the views of participants on the concepts that emerged from content analysis and observation, whilst leaving the door open

for other themes or concepts to emerge. The two methods, interviews and survey, as well as the preliminary process of data analysis, are discussed in the following sections.

5.3.2.1 Interviews

The aims of conducting interviews with Shi‘a and Sunni Iraqis were to clarify the themes that emerged from observation and content analysis, to explore the impact of ‘Ashura rituals on Shi‘a -Sunni relations pre and post-2003, and to reveal nuances of the impact of ‘Ashura rituals on Shi‘a-Sunni relations that observation and content analysis may have failed to reveal. It is generally accepted that with the latter two methods, questions that are mainly related to ‘what’, ‘where’, and ‘when’ can be answered but not necessarily those that are related to ‘why’. In contrast, interviews have the capacity to provide answers for all the aforementioned questions (Leedy and Ormrod, 2010). It was therefore necessary to interview Shi‘a and Sunni Muslims in order to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of ‘Ashura on Shi‘a-Sunni relations in Iraq. For example, one of the major themes emerged from observation and content analysis was the dominance of ‘Ashura rituals, especially the rituals of *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* in post-2003 Iraq. Whilst it was evident that extensive numbers of Shi‘a Iraqis flocked to Karbala in 2016 to commemorate Husayn’s death on the Fortieth, their motivation was not entirely clear: was it a religious gathering, a protest, or simply a social and cultural phenomenon, which could be strategically manipulated? This is where interviews can provide some insights and answers to the above-mentioned questions, wherein I, as the researcher, “ask about, and listen to, what people themselves tell about their lived world” (Kvale, 2007, p. 2). Thus, conducting interviews is central to understanding what impact ‘Ashura rituals might have on Shi‘a-Sunni relations.

Interviews as a method of data collection can provide in-depth accounts of Shi‘a-Sunni relations pre-2003, particularly when the other two methods fail to collect the required data. Clearly, observation is no longer a valid option and the scarce information available in the related literature of the commemoration of ‘Ashura, particularly during the Ba‘ath rule, makes it difficult to conduct content analysis. The importance of investigating elements that affected Shi‘a-Sunni relations pre-2003, according to Haddad (2011), is crucial to understanding the nature of Shi‘a-Sunni relations post-2003. This is because, as Haddad argues, the way the Shi‘a were treated (or dealt with) pre-2003 has become a contentious issue between the Shi‘a and the Sunni in post-2003 Iraq. Whilst

the Shi‘a believe that they were marginalised and oppressed, the majority of the Sunni believe that the notion of Shi‘a oppression ranges from being greatly exaggerated and manipulated to a fabricated story at its worst (Haddad, 2011). In fact, Rosenthal (1993, p. 1) discusses the possibilities of interviewees providing stories that are based more on imagined than observed events, which is one of the main reasons for not relying entirely on interviews for data collection in the thesis.

Finally, researchers have to be open to the possibility that the themes that emerge from conducting interviews can be different from the themes that emerge from the other two methods of data collection. This is because themes that emerge from observation and content analysis are based on the researcher’s understanding and interpretation of a particular issue, whereas themes that emerge from interviews are based on participants’ reflection on this issue which tend to be based on their worldviews (Leedy and Ormrod, 2010). However, themes emerging from interviews can also validate the ones that emerged from the other two methods of data collection. In any case, whether different themes emerge or they validate the existing themes, interviews are important because, as Leedy and Ormrod (2010) note, interviews as a qualitative methodology are used to “to understand peoples’ perceptions, perspectives, and understanding of a particular situation” (p. 139). In addition to conducting interviews with Shi‘a and Sunni Iraqis, an online survey was conducted.

5.3.2.2 Survey

This method of data collection was utilised to complement the interviews and to gain access to more participants in order to elicit their insights and perspectives on issues related to the research topic. Survey is a valid and reliable research method and have been used in studies examining the role of rituals in societies (Kalmijn, 2004; Oswald, 2002; Walter, 2013). In particular, many scholars used Survey Monkey to understand the way(s) rituals impact social relations (Antoniades, and Haan, 2018; Montross-Thomas et al., 2016). Following the steps of the above-mentioned scholars, Survey Monkey was utilised to collect data from Shi‘a and Sunni Iraqis residing in Iraq and the UK, to compensate for what I considered to be an inadequate number of interview participants, an issue that is discussed in details in section 5.4.2. In order to be consistent, the main questions used for the interviews were also used in the survey. The questionnaire provided a free-text box for respondent’s qualitative comments: for each question, respondents were provided with the opportunity to freely express their views. On

this basis, the survey can be considered a source of qualitative data. In total, fifty-three Shi'a and Sunni Iraqis residing in the UK participated in an online survey. Twenty-four participants identified themselves as Shi'a, ten as Sunni, and the rest ranged between secular, Iraqi, Muslim, and non-believer. Overall, the number of responses added value to the research, but the survey has its own weaknesses especially when participants provide brief answers. Ideally, if I had their contact information, which would defeat the purpose of conducting the survey, I would have asked them to clarify their views.

After discussing the rationale for using interviews and a survey to elicit information from Shi'a and Sunni Iraqis in the second stage of data collection and analysis, the language used to collect data deserves some attention. Given that the participants are native Arabic speakers, all interviews were conducted in Arabic. The questions asked in the survey were in Arabic too. The data collected from the interviews and the survey were translated from Arabic to English and transcribed. For the interviews, in particular, in order to main the integrity of the information provided by the interviewees, shortly upon the completion of each interview, I transcribed it. As noted by Dickson-Swift et al. (2007), "the goal of transcription is to transform oral speech into a printed copy, accurately capturing the words of the research participants" (p. 337). Dickson-Swift et al. further noted that accurate transcription is a fundamental first step in data analysis.

Because Arabic is my first language and given my professional training in translation, as I have a graduate degree in Arabic-English Translating and Interpreting, I was able to undertake the task of translating the data collected from Arabic into English. However, there were some minor challenges. For example, as one of the main four elements of SRT framework, I focused on the strategic use of 'Ashura rituals in the interviews and the survey questions, but there is no equivalent to the word 'strategic' in Arabic. To circumvent this issue, I avoided using the term 'strategic', and instead I used equivalent terms in the questions asked (see section 7.1.2) such as: 'who is benefiting from the rituals'; 'who is the most enthusiastic in observing the rituals'; and, 'who plays a key role in sponsoring the rituals'. I also consulted key informants on this issue as discussed in detail in section 7.3.2.

Following the completion of data collection in this stage, I began analysing the transcribed texts from interviews and answers to the survey questions. I used Creswell's "data analysis spiral" (as cited in Leedy & Ormrod, 2010, p. 153) as a method of data analysis. As was recommended in the data analysis

spiral, I went through the data several times, adhering to the following stages: firstly, breaking larger units into smaller ones; secondly, getting an overall sense of the data; thirdly, finding meaning in the data; and finally summarising the data (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). This analysis revealed a number of main themes related to the strength of ‘Ashura rituals, their strategic use, symbolic meanings of the rituals, and social outcomes. Following this stage, seven key informants were presented with the main emergent themes from the first stage of data collection for clarification and validation.

5.3.3 Stage three: seeking feedback from key informant interviews

The aim of conducting key informant interviews was to answer and to clarify ambiguous issues raised from the first and second stage of data collection and to seek feedback in terms of the identified or emerging concepts. As defined by Parsons (2008, p. 2), key informant interviews are “in-depth interviews of a select non-random group of experts who are most knowledgeable of the organization or issue”. By seeking opinions and feedback from key informants, I satisfied this element of triangulation and enhanced the reliability and validity of my research (Cooper & Endacott, 2007; Howe, 2012).

In this final stage, seven interviews were conducted with five Shi‘a and two Sunni key informants, as opposed to the non-expert participants used in the second stage. At the beginning of each interview, I briefly explained the nature of the research, and the reasons for conducting the interviews. In addition, the interviewees received a copy of the consent form (see Appendix 4) and were asked to read and sign it (optional) prior to the start of the interview process (as an option). It is worth noting that only two Shi‘a key informants agreed to sign the consent form. This was followed by a conversation which allowed the key informants to ask questions or clarify aspects of the research. Prior to commencing with asking the interview questions, I asked their permission to audio record the interview using my smart phone recording device. Only two Shi‘a key informants agreed to this request. When an audio recording was not used, notes were taken during the interview to highlight key points that the key informants shared. Main themes deduced from the interview were read back to them for validity. In addition, the transcription of the interview took place at the same day of the interview or the following day in order to retain as much as possible of the interview content.

Questions presented to key informants during the interview with respect to the emerging themes as a result of the first and second stage of data collection and analysis, were organised into four categories: the strength of rituals, the strategic use of rituals, symbolic meanings of rituals, and social outcomes.

The considerations and feedback provided by key informants will be discussed in Chapter Seven and presented according to SRTs main concepts: strength of rituals, strategic use of rituals, symbolic meanings of rituals, and social outcomes. The final findings are also presented in Chapter Seven. Findings have been defined "as the data-driven and integrated discoveries, judgments, and/or pronouncements researchers offer about the phenomena, events, or cases under investigation" (Sandelowski and Barroso, 2003, pp. 909-910). Based on this definition, the final round of data analysis involved exploring themes that materialised from three stages of data analysis and examining the relationships between them. In line with the theoretical approach adopted in this thesis, the findings of this thesis are presented in four categories: ritual strength, their strategic use, symbolic meanings of rituals, and social outcomes of the commemoration of 'Ashura. After discussing the research methodology and reasons for collecting and analysing data in three stages, an introduction to research participants is presented in the next sections, followed by outlining recruitment strategies.

5.4 Purposeful Sampling: Research participants

Palinkas et. al. (2015, p. 2) note that purposeful sampling is widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest. It is a technique that is mainly used to enhance the quality of data collected from conducting interviews, one of the main methods used in this thesis, and not necessarily used for the other two methods of data collection, namely observation and content analysis, where triangulation is predominant. Purposeful sampling involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Cresswell and Plano Clark, 2011). In qualitative research, participants are chosen to both 'represent' and 'symbolise' features of relevance to the investigation (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003, p. 83). Accordingly, I recruited participants from two different groups: Shi'a and Sunni Iraqis, living

in Iraq or in the UK, and key informants who are experts on Shi‘a rituals and Shi‘a-Sunni relations, residing in Iraq or in the UK.

As the focus of this research is on exploring Shi‘a rituals and examining their impact on Shi‘a-Sunni relations in Iraq, the Shi‘a and Sunni Iraqis residing in Iraq or abroad, are regarded as the main source of data. Methods used to collect data from these groups (which will be called Groups One and Two) are interviews and a survey, as previously explained. Additional interviews were conducted with key informants (Group Three), who were identified as experts in their field, including religious leaders, who were chosen to obtain their perspectives on issues related to ‘Ashura rituals and on Shi‘a-Sunni relations. As defined by Parsons (2008, p. 2), key informant interviews are “in-depth interviews of a select non-random group of experts who are most knowledgeable of the organization or issue”. Religious leaders were chosen because whilst they have always influenced Iraqi society, their influence has increased significantly after 2003, particularly the Shi‘a religious establishment (Jabar, 2010).

Overall, the research participants in this study represented these different sample populations:

1- Group One: Thirty-eight Shi‘a Iraqis
   a. Fourteen individual Shi‘a Iraqis were selected for individual interviews (eight residing in Iraq and six residing in the UK).
   b. Twenty-four Shi‘a Iraqi individuals took part in an online survey.
2- Group Two: Eighteen Sunni Iraqis
   a. Eight individual Sunni Iraqis were selected for individual interviews (four residing in Iraq and four residing in the UK).
   b. Ten Sunni Iraqi individuals took part in an online survey.
3- Group Three: Seven key informants (five Shi‘as and two Sunnis) were selected for interviews.

After identifying research participants categorised in three different groups, the focus of the discussion will be on identifying the main selection criteria for the three Groups. Then, the focus of the discussion will shift to participants’ recruitment strategy.

5.4.1 Selection criteria for Shi‘a and Sunni Iraqis (Group One and Group Two)

The discussion of the selection criteria for both Shi‘a and Sunni groups are presented in this section given that same criteria were applied to both groups. It is important to acknowledge that Shi‘a and Sunni are simply general and approximate terms given that variables including age, geographical location, education, class, degrees of piety, and strictness of observance affect the meaning and relevance of the two terms from person to person (Jabar, 2010). To put it succinctly, there are more variables involved in what it means to be a Shi‘a or a Sunni than simply subscription to a particular metaphysical philosophy. It is critical to recognise that the above-mentioned variables also affect the meaning and relevance of ‘Ashura rituals for different individuals (Jabar, 2010). Nonetheless, there is no choice but to accept using the two terms, Shi‘a and Sunni.

In this study, Shi‘a and Sunni refer solely to those who identify themselves as such. This need not necessarily be related to religious observance (Jabar, 2010). In fact, according to al-Wardi (2013b), many Shi‘as who practice ‘Ashura rituals are not necessarily religious. Al-Abieath (2017, p. 14) observed this phenomenon and referred to it as cultural religion: religion of the masses which includes popular practices and beliefs that are often adhered to despite what their ‘official’ religion’s doctrine states. Additionally, there will inevitably be exceptions; no researcher can accurately account for every individual view held by every Sunni and Shi‘a (Haddad, 2011). We must therefore identify majority positions and dominant narratives whilst recognising that dissenting and alternate views are always existent.

Whilst recognising the diversity of the Iraqi Shi‘as and Sunnis, particular features of these groups were taken into consideration when selecting participants for interviews. According to Ritchie and Lewis (2003), participants “are chosen because they have particular features or characteristics which will enable detailed exploration and understanding of the central themes and puzzles which the researcher wishes to study” (p. 78). Thus, in order to collect reliable data, covering a wider spectrum of these groups is recommended. The challenge in this case is to come up with selection criteria that fit the nature and the aim of this research study.

For Shi‘a and Sunni Iraqis (Groups One and Two), criteria including the participant’s location (place of residence), age, and gender were considered for selecting potential participants. The relevancy of establishing place of residence as a criterion stems from the fact that most Iraqi cities

and provinces are divided along sectarian lines (Jabar, 2010; Haddad, 2011). Thus, potential research participants should reflect and/or correspond to the nature of this divide. Put succinctly, I attempted to recruit participants who come from different Iraqi cities and communities. Thus, in order to produce reliable data, the geography of participants' residences is of paramount. It is worth considering that a place of residence as selection criterion can also reflect, to a certain degree, other characteristics of Shi'a and Sunni groups such as social status and education.

Within the criterion of place of residence, not only Shi'a and Sunni Iraqis who reside in Iraq were considered as potential participants but also those (Shi'a s and Sunnis) who live in the UK, given that the researcher is based in the UK (more details are provided in the discussion of the interviews, section 5.4.2). The instability and lack of security in Iraq has created an unpleasant reality that is, in fact, dangerous for most Iraqis, thus, many of them have fled the country. Many of these Iraqis are still very much connected and aware of current events in Iraq. It is therefore unreasonable to exclude them from participating in this study as their voices should be represented. Furthermore, the UK has been chosen as an alternative for three reasons: many Shi'a and Sunni Iraqi reside

in the UK and many Shi'a and Sunni religious institutions exist there; secondly, many Shi'a British-Iraqis travel to Iraq during the commemoration of 'Ashura; and thirdly, because of the notion of freedom of speech existing in the UK, Iraqis (both Shi'a and Sunni) in the UK have more freedom to express their views than those in the Middle East, particularly about a sensitive issue such as the topic of my research, and this will ultimately enrich the data.

Participant age is another important selection criterion. Age is commonly used as a selection criterion for research studies (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). This is important both to ensure that all relevant age groups are included and to ensure that any differences in perspective between age groups can be explored (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003, p. 79). Based on this view, this research study will consider two age groups: above the age of thirty and under thirty years of age. The reason for considering the age of thirty as a watershed is related to the Shi'a uprising in 1991, which ensued from the First Gulf War to liberate Kuwaiti from the Iraqi occupation. This uprising, in the views of many, changed Shi'a-Sunni relations in Iraq due to the brutality expressed by the regime at that time to quell any Shi'a opposition (Haddad, 2014). Thus, the generation who grew up after the

1991 Shi‘a uprising may have different views than the older generation, when Shi‘a-Sunni relations was relatively normal.

In addition to different age groups, gender, male and female, was considered as a selection criterion. As indicated in the literature review, both men and women have played a significant role in the commemoration of ‘Ashura. Regarding the latter, it has been noted that women participated in the first public commemoration of ‘Ashura in Baghdad in the tenth century (Jabar, 2010). When ‘Ashura rituals were publically banned in Iraq during the regime of the Ba‘ath Party (1968-2003), Iraqi Shi‘a women continued practising aspects of these rituals in the privacy of their homes (Jabar, 2010). Finally, since the fall of the regime in 2003, Iraqi Shi‘a women have played an active role in participating publicly in ‘Ashura rituals. In summary, three main selection criteria were adopted in this thesis to reflect participants’ diversity: different Shi‘a and Sunni communities, cities and towns, different age categories, and both male and female participants.

5.4.2 Shi‘a and Sunni Iraqis (Groups One and Two) recruitment strategy

The same strategies were used to recruit Shi‘a and Sunni Iraqis, and they are discussed in this section. Shi‘a and Sunni Iraqis were recruited for individual interviews and for an online survey. It should be noted that recruiting Shi‘a and Sunni Iraqis for interviews was the main focus but, due to challenges associated with this process, an online survey was also utilised to compensate for the low numbers of participants who were willing to be interviewed.

Interviews: Shi‘a and Sunni Iraqis residing in Iraq are regarded as the best source of data as they themselves have been involved in and/or were first-hand witnesses to events unfolding in their environment. Thus, they have a lot to offer in terms of providing their own perspectives and analysis (Fibiger, 2010). In addition, interviews provide the researchers with the opportunity to clarify issues raised by participants, ask them to elaborate, or even ask more questions (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). Yet the instability and lack of security in Iraq creates challenges for researchers to conduct face-to-face interviews with locals for the purpose of gaining their insights on a particular issue. In order to bypass these challenges and to be able to conduct interviews successfully, interviews with Shi‘a and Sunni Iraqis have been conducted via Skype.

Whilst conducting fieldwork in Iraq, observing *ziyarat al-Arba'in* in 2016, I managed to establish a few contacts with Shi'a and Sunni Iraqis. After coming back to the UK, I contacted them and proposed a Skype meeting. Prior to conducting the interviews, I explained the nature of the research and the way data would be handled. I affirmed to them that their names would not be mentioned and also that no one would have access to the data except me (the researcher). Overall, I was able to conduct Skype meetings with eight Shi'a (one woman over thirty years of age, three men under thirty years of age, four men over the age of thirty) and four Sunni Iraqis (two women over thirty years old, and two men over the age of thirty years).

According to Sullivan (2012, p. 54), with the advancement of technology, Skype, as communication software, has been used for qualitative research, as a reliable method to conduct interviews with individuals as well as groups. However, Markham (2008, p. 255) argues that researchers should be cautious about some ethical concerns associated with using Skype to conduct interviews such as authenticity in interactions. In response to this, Sullivan (2012, p. 59) notes that "We can never be sure if the self being presented is the genuine thing whether it is face-to-face, over the telephone, in writing, or on the computer". Sullivan adds that through the use of communication programmes, our reach is potentially limitless, at least geographically, for interviewing, depending on the topic of interest, a point that is relevant to adopting Skype as a method to collect views and perspectives from Iraqis residing in Iraq.

In addition to Iraqis residing in Iraq, I also recruited Shi'a and Sunni Iraqis who live in the UK. In terms of methods used to recruit Shi'a and Sunni Iraqis residing in the UK, a number of universities as well as Shi'a and Sunni religious organisations were contacted. Once these connections were established, a request for participants was emailed and/or handed out to them (see Appendix 3). However, only a few participants showed an interest and willingness to be interviewed. This low turnout can be related to the challenges associated with a research topic that explores religious rituals and might link participants to the antagonism between the Shi'a and the Sunni. Cohen and Arieli (2011) recognise these challenges and argue that there are difficulties in accessing data in such a situation:

> Conflict has an impact on the circumstances of life for groups and individuals with direct interests and involvement therein, but it also has significance for those seemingly without. Thus, in an environment affected by conflict, all parts of society

> . . . can be highly suspicious of outsiders and express a preference to refrain from exposure. (p. 425)

Cohen and Arieli further add that the researcher, whether a party to the conflict or not, faces the challenge of gaining familiarity with, and cooperation from, the research population in such an environment, which may be closed to and mistrusting of outsiders. This challenge may be especially significant for studies "which focus on the conflict itself and in some cases even for those not directly related to it" (Cohen and Arieli, 2011, p. 425). To overcome this challenge, Cohen and Arieli suggest the use of Snow Sampling Methodology (SSM). They define SSM as a "distinct method of convenience sampling which has been . . . commonly used to locate, access, and involve people from specific populations in cases where the researcher anticipates difficulties in creating a representative sample of the research population" (Cohen and Arieli, 2011, p. 428). It has been suggested that SSM is probably the most effective method to access hidden and/or hard to reach populations (Valdez & Kaplan, as discussed in Cohen & Arieli, 2011). Given that Shi'a and Sunni Iraqis have been experiencing sectarian tension and violence since 2003, it is important to take into consideration this reality when it comes to conducting interviews with them. Based on this understanding, SSM was employed to recruit Shi'a and Sunni Iraqis to participate in this research study.

In addition to the initial request for participants, the SSM (Cohen and Arieli, 2011) was also utilised to recruit more participants. After conducting interviews with the initial Shi'a and Sunni participants, I asked them to pass the invitation on to their relatives and friends who fit the selection criteria and might have had an interest in participating in my research. Based on these methods of recruiting, I was able to recruit six Shi'a (one woman over thirty, and two women under thirty years of age, and two men over thirty years of age) and four Sunni (four men over the age of thirty years).

Overall, the number of individuals drawn from each of the identified groupings (fourteen Shi'a Iraqis and eight Sunni Iraqis) mentioned above was consistent with Cooper and Endacott's (2007) finding that five to eight participants are usually sufficient for a sample. Although this supported the requirement of qualitative research in terms of number of participants for interviews, as a researcher I was not convinced that I had reached "sampling to the point of saturation" (Cooper and Endacott, 2007, p. 3; Mason, 2010) and assumed that more participants were required.

Unfortunately, I was not able to recruit more participants mainly due to the inherent culture of mistrust that persists among Iraqis, which warrants some explanation. In addition, the number of participants recruited shows a lack of Sunni interest in the research in comparison to the Shi'a, an issue that can also be related to the culture of mistrust.

Generally, mistrust is a widespread issue in Iraq post-2003 resulting mainly from the instability, lack of security, and terrorism. However, the notion of mistrust was even worse during the rule of Saddam Hussein as the regime encouraged and, in fact, rewarded, people who came forward with information concerning the security of the regime, real or imaginary, or about their family members, friends, and neighbours, thus creating a culture of fear and mistrust among Iraqis (Haddad, 2011). Because of this culture, Iraqis tend not to discuss sensitive political or religious issues freely except with people they know and trust (Jabar, 2010; Haddad, 2011). It is no surprise then that Iraqis mistrust researchers particularly when the research topic is related to politics or religion. Al-Wardi (1965, p. 7) recognised this issue and lamented that as a researcher "…if you carry a pen and paper when chatting with people, they would think that you are a government informant". Undoubtedly, this creates a challenge for the researcher but can be circumvented by conducting other methods of data collection such as the online survey, given that it offers a sense of freedom and anonymity to the participants (Sullivan, 2012, p. 58).

Online survey: This method was chosen because it can be designed in way that would give participants the option of anonymity (Sullivan, 2012). In this way, this research will benefit from the perspectives of those who would not feel comfortable identifying themselves and thus fulfilling the element of purposeful sampling which has been adopted in this research. There are some disadvantages however, to using online survey, Duffy et. al. (2005) argue, such as it tends to achieve samples that are more educated and active online. Given the culture of mistrust, as discussed earlier, the element of anonymity trumps the concerns of disproportionate sampling.

Participants in the survey were invited by emails circulated by members of the Iraqi Academic Association (IAA). This organisation, which was founded in the UK in 1994, supports Iraqi academics and extends bridges to educational institutes and institutions of civil society and other relevant bodies for the benefit of Iraqi academics, whether abroad or in Iraq. IAA membership is open to all Iraqi academics, irrespective of their sectarian identity and religion.

Originally, a request for participants was sent to the IAA in order to identify potential Iraqis who are willing to be interviewed. Although my request was approved and distributed to all members of the Association, only two members were willing to participate, a low number given that, according to their website, there are seven hundred and twenty-five members. Through consultation with members of IAA, I decided to use an online survey. Consequently, Survey Monkey, an internet programme and hosting site that enables a researcher to develop a survey for use over the internet (Waclawski, 2012), was utilised to design a survey comprising the ten questions that had been used for the face-to face interviews.

To test its workability, this survey was sent to some members of the IAA for their feedback. After its successful trial, the survey uniform resource locater (URL) was copied and pasted into an email and sent to members of IAA. Following this email, fifty-four Shi'a and Sunni Iraqis participated in the survey. This relatively significant number of responses could be in fact related to the anonymity feature of the survey but also one cannot ignore other advantages of using this method of data collection for participants, including the flexibility to complete the survey when and where it best suit participants.

5.4.3 Selection criteria for Key informants (Group Three)

The main selection criterion for this group is their knowledge and expertise on the commemoration of 'Ashura and Iraqi society: Shi'a and Sunni individuals who have this knowledge whether based in Iraq or the UK were selected (given that the researcher is based in the UK, and affiliated with a university that is based in the UK). In that regard, religious leaders, and academics (Iraqis and non-Iraqis) were mainly represented. Strategies used to recruit these participants are discussed in the following sections.

5.4.4 Key informants (Group Three) recruitment strategy

A total of seven Shi'a and Sunni key informants, were recruited for interviews. Following the same theme, in terms of the lack of Sunni interest in the research in comparison to the Shi'a, five Shi'a key informants and two Sunni key informants were willing to participate in the research. The Shi'a key informants were two prominent Iraqi religious leaders, one is based in Karbala and the other one is based in London; an Iranian religious leader and educator who is based in the UK; an Iraqi academic who teaches at universities in Iraq and in the UK and a non-Iraqi academic, an American

academic who converted to Shi‘ism and who is based in the UK. The Sunni key informants were a religious leader within the Muslim World League, who is based in London, and an Iraqi assistant professor, who is based in the UK.

I used different approaches to identify and recruit the above-mentioned key informants. Some of them were identified because they publish and podcast relevant materials to the commemoration of ‘Ashura on social media, whilst others I met during conferences and other academic or public events. An Iraqi religious leader who spends his time between the UK and Iraq was selected as a key informant for his knowledge with respect to ‘Ashura rituals. I identified this religious leader because he delivers sermons during ‘Ashura and many of them have been videotaped and made available on social media channels, including Twitter and YouTube. After initial contact to obtain this key informant’s willingness to participate in the research, I met with him in his office in London. Another Iraqi Shi‘a religious leader who delivered a sermon at a funeral that I attended, was approached for an interview. According to Shi‘a tradition, part of this sermon is designated to recount the tragedy of Karbala, whilst highlighting the suffering of Husayn and *ahl al-bayt*. After the service, I introduced myself to this religious leader and asked for an interview. He agreed and we met the following day at the same religious organisation, *husaynya* in Iraq.

The third Shi‘a key informant identified was an Iraqi academic residing in the UK. This academic published a paper discussing the theories of ‘Ali al-Wardi, in which his contact information was provided. After an initial contact (an email) to obtain this key informant’s willingness to participate in the research, I met with him in a coffee place in London. The other two Shi‘a key informants were influential experts in the field of religious studies: an American scholar and academic on the subject of Shi‘a Islam and a graduate of the Islamic Seminaries of Qum, Iran; and an Iranian-UK educator and director of an Islamic Centre in the UK. These two key informants were identified where I attended a conference related to Shi‘a studies in the UK. I approached them during the conference, individually, introduced myself and my research topic, and then asked them whether they were interested in participating in my research. They both agreed to be interviewed.

Although similar strategies were used, it was more challenging to recruit Sunni key informants than Shi‘a key informants. Online search for Sunni religious leaders who are based in the UK led to the identification of twenty potential Sunni key informants. A letter of request for interview was

emailed to them as an attachment or delivered to their respective religious organisations where I introduced myself, my supervisors, and the head of the School, as well as information related to the anticipated questions, anticipated interview time and issues of confidentiality (see Appendix 3). However, only one religious leader, non-Iraqi, agreed to be interviewed. After the interview, using SSM, I asked this key informant to recommend other religious leaders or academics. However, my request was not successful. Based on my recruitment experience, identifying Sunni key informants was challenging because, for a period that spanned over a year, I met many knowledgeable individuals at conferences and other public events such as seminars and worships, who could have added value to the research topic. However, only one individual was willing to be interviewed. That said, the second key Sunni informant was identified when I attended a conference in the UK in 2018. This Iraqi key informant is a university assistant professor based in the UK, with extensive knowledge on Shi'a-Sunni relations in Iraq. After discussing the two main methodological elements, triangulation and purposeful sampling, adopted in this thesis, the final one, reflexivity, is discussed in the following sections.

5.5 Reflexivity: Critical reflection of the researcher's views

Given that my cultural and religious background as a Shi'a Iraqi relates to the research topic, it is necessary to discuss these issues to ensure that they would not affect the themes that emerged from the research and thus minimise subjectivity and bias. Malterud (2001, pp. 483-484) argues that the "researcher's background and position will affect what they choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged most adequate for this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and the communication of conclusion". This view is supported by contemporary theories of knowledge which dispute the notion of 'neutrality' or even 'invisibility' of researchers and argue that instead researchers are guided, consciously or otherwise, by their own beliefs and background (Berger, 2015). Thus, to minimise subjectivity, researchers should discuss their views and preconceptions related to the research topic before and throughout the research stages, in order to not to confuse them with knowledge that emerges from the research. This relatively recent trend in research is referred to as reflexivity, and is adopted in the three methods of data collection, especially observation and content analysis.

For Mantzoukas (2005, p. 287), reflexivity, which is essentially involve a process of examining the assumptions and beliefs of the researcher, requires researchers to describe their thoughts, ideas, and hypotheses. The aim of this critical reflection process is to make researchers aware of their own biases and preconceived assumptions and asks them to declare them (Berger, 2015; Mantzoukas, 2005). This is a dynamic process allowing researchers to continue reflecting on their assumptions and biases throughout their research. Within this context, it should be noted that preconceptions are not the same as bias, unless the researcher fails to discuss them. In fact, if reflexivity, the process of critical reflection, is thoroughly maintained, personal issues can be valuable sources for relevant and specific research (Berger, 2015; Mantzoukas, 2005).

Overall, to ensure the trustworthiness in qualitative research, the researcher should take care not to confuse knowledge intuitively present in advance, and possibly embedded in preconceptions, with knowledge emerging from inquiry of systematically obtained material (Malterud, 1993, p. 201). This situation can be avoided by a declaration of beliefs before the start of the study and by continuing to reflect on them as the research progresses. Based on this understanding, as the researcher, my relevant views, beliefs, and background are discussed in the following sections.

5.5.1 Researcher's views and background

As a Shi'a Muslim, the commemoration of 'Ashura forms a part of my identity, and I am of the view that the Shi'a should not be denied the right to commemorate the death of Imam Husayn, in the same way that the Sunni have the right to observe the day of 'Ashura in their own way. I grew up in a Shi'a family and, like many Shi'a families in Iraq, the commemoration of Husayn's death was observed annually, even when it was banned, by conducting private rituals during the rule of Ba'ath Party. Typically, in the 1980s, on 'Ashura day, female members of the family wore dark or even black clothes and cooked traditional food, as part of the mourning rituals, for family members. In some cases, food was also offered to relatives, neighbours and friends, all in the name of intercession from Husayn and *ahl al-bayt*. In the 1990s, in addition to cooking, women started to hold low profile *majalis al-'Aza* or memorial services in their houses, without the adornment of flags or banners as has been done post-2003. In this way, the rituals continued despite repression. In my view, through the practice of these low-profile rituals, the Shi'a managed to maintain their distinct identity, and the rituals also contributed to highlighting differences between Shi'a and

Sunni Iraqis. Within the context of differences, it is crucial to emphasise that, from my own experience at that time, the Shi‘a did not commemorate ‘Ashura in order to differentiate themselves from the Sunni nor were they conveying a political statement, rather they were simply following their own norms and traditions.

As a Shi‘a Iraqi, I am of the view that Shi‘a-Sunni relations in Iraq changed after the fall of the regime of Saddam Hussein in 2003. It is true that the ascendancy of Shi‘a to power has contributed to this change, but I also believe that events that took place pre-2003 have also affected Shi‘a-Sunni relations and contributed to increasing tension between them after the fall of the Ba‘ath regime. Broadly, from the perspective of majority rule and minority rights, and in societies that adhere to the practices of Islam, I certainly sympathise with Haddad’s (2011) argument, noted in the previous Chapter, that the Shi‘a have been systematically marginalised, given that most of their traditions and rituals have not been accepted by the Sunni majority within the Islamic world. However, in the meantime, I am of the opinion that the commemoration of ‘Ashura should be critically examined to determine whether current practices are a symptom or a cause of broken relations, particularly in the current climate of tense relations between the Shi‘a and the Sunni. I am also influenced by Western theories on social identity, conflict, culture and power.

I also recognise that the overwhelming majority of Iraqis, encompassing Shi‘a, Sunni, Kurds, Christians, and other ethnic and religious groups, have been deeply affected by a series of traumatic events including wars, sanctions, and invasions, and especially the deterioration of Shi‘a-Sunni relations in post-2003. In my view, Iraqis have been living in a society that has been marred by crime and corruption in all its forms, including political, judicial, and affecting police, public service, education, health and even moral corruption. According to Dodge, T. (2014, p. 17) corruption has been eroding the Iraqi state from all directions. In the midst of this, religiosity or religious practices and rituals, especially the annual commemoration of ‘Ashura, have resurfaced and have become the most palpable feature of Iraqi society. I also believe that when such religious practices become dominant, ‘black and white’ views based on non-negotiable values and beliefs become the norm and thus deprive society of views that are based on critical thinking. The dire consequence in this case is that of people losing the ability to question and criticise their actions and traditions, which ultimately leads to perpetuating the *status quo*. However, I do not deny some

positive aspects of observing these religious practices including, for example, spirituality and empowerment. A final reflection is that as a researcher, I recognise that I can be influenced by past and current events. This is perhaps a feature of human thinking that is difficult to escape but, as stated previously, interviewing Shi‘a and Sunni Iraqis in addition to other methods of data collection are utilised to ensure trustworthiness of this research and its outcomes.

5.6 Chapter Summary

The discussion in this chapter began with introducing the thesis approach and then justifying the use of a qualitative approach. After that, three main aspects of the methodology adopted in this thesis were discussed: research methodology, which involves three stages of data analysis; purposeful sampling of research participants; and reflexivity. The three stage approach was necessary to minimise subjectivity and bias. In the first stage, I conducted content analysis of the contemporary commemoration of ‘Ashura and observation of *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*, in Karbala. The aim was to outline contemporary ‘Ashura rituals and to explore the strength of the rituals, their strategic use, what symbolism the rituals carry, and the social outcome of commemorating ‘Ashura. In the second stage, I asked Shi‘a and Sunni Iraqis questions to elicit their views on the impact of ‘Ashura rituals on Shi‘a-Sunni relations. The aim of this stage was to obtain the views of participants on the concepts that emerged from the content analysis and the observation, whilst leaving the door open for other themes or concepts to emerge. This analysis revealed a number of main themes in the data, which allowed identification of different concepts, organised in four categories, the strength of ‘Ashura rituals, their strategic use, symbolism expressed by the rituals and the social outcomes of commemorating ‘Ashura.

In the final stage, I conducted interviews with key informants who have considerable knowledge about ‘Ashura rituals and Shi’a-Sunni dynamics in Iraq for feedback about themes and concepts that emerged from the first and second stages of data analysis. After that, I introduced the participants in this thesis represented by three groups, Shi’a Iraqis, Sunni Iraqis, and key informant, outlining their selection criteria and also the recruitment strategies. Finally, as a researcher, I reflected on my own views and background relevant to the research topic. In the next chapter, findings of the first stage of data analysis are presented.

6 Findings of Stage One: Content analysis and observation

The qualitative methodology used for this inquiry, as described in Chapter Five, was comprised of three stages of data collection. This chapter presents the findings of the first stage of data analysis, the content analysis of online materials related to the commemoration of ‘Ashura and observation of *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* that was conducted in Iraq. The discussion in this chapter starts with mapping out detailed progress of contemporary ‘Ashura rituals based mainly on content analysis. Then, this chapter presents four main themes resulting from the previous research methods, which will be organised in four categories: ritual strength, their strategic use, symbolic meanings of rituals and social outcome.

6.1 The progress of contemporary ‘Ashura rituals (2016-2019)

Before commencing with the analysis of the rituals’ strength, their strategic use, the symbolic meanings of the rituals and the social outcomes, an overall reflection on the most recent rituals’ progression is necessary to help identify themes and concepts within the data. Content analysis shows that although ‘Ashura rituals take place in different villages, communities and cities in Iraq, Karbala is the principle location for commemorating the killing of Husayn. The commemoration of ‘Ashura starts with the ceremony of flag changing at the shrine of Husayn on the first night of Muharram, and then memorial services are observed daily for the first ten days of Muharram. These services cover day-by-day historical events that took place in 680, and re-enacting the battle of Karbala, and subsequently re-awakening Shi‘a memories, emotions and passions. On the tenth, the day of ‘Ashura, the rituals take a more visible, public, and even violent form, especially in Karbala. After the day of ‘Ashura, the rituals recede, but only re-gain momentum with the beginning of the following month, Safar, at which time the Shi‘a start to get ready for the final and one of most visible, and well attended rituals of *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*, which take place on the fortieth day after the day of ‘Ashura (the visibility of these rituals can be seen in Figure 4 and explained in detail in section 6.2.1.1).

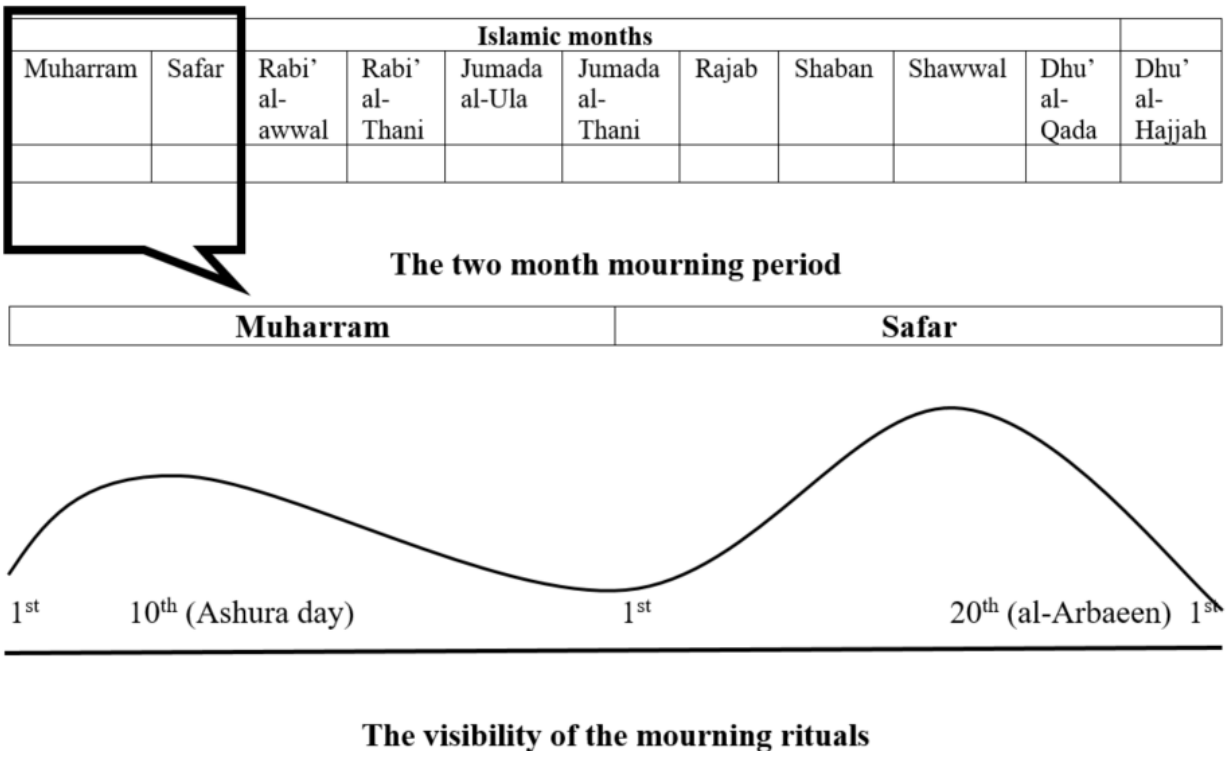


Figure 4 *An overview of visibility of the mourning rituals (author's compilation).*

6.1.1 Ceremonial flag changing: declaring the beginning of the mourning period

According to the Imam Hussein Holy Shrine website (2019), the aim of the ceremonial flag changing at the shrine of Imam Husayn is to publicly declare the beginning of the mourning period for the killing of Husayn (al-Safar, 2019). At the ceremony, crowds gather (see Figure 5) at Husayn's shrine in Karbala, chanting *Lebayk ya* Husayn…*Lebayk ya* Husayn (Husayn, we are at your service…Husayn, we are at your service), whilst a person from the shrine of Husayn changes the red flag (representing revenge) on the shrine dome to the black flag of mourning (see Figures 6 and 7). The red flag is taken down to drumbeats and handed to the keepers of the Husayn shrine in Karbala. Enthusiasm rises and participants chant (Husayn...Husayn) for a few minutes. The crowds start *latmiya* to the rhythms of an old Iraqi chant, which is narrated by a qualified reciter and amplified around Husayn's shrine square (*al-Sahan*). This chant is special for the agonizing beginning of Muharram. The chant says:

Oh 'Ashura month, second to no other

> During you, Sajjad's [a nick name for Husayn's son] father's [Husayn] heart was broken
> Oh 'Ashura month, you triggered sorrow
> During you, Al- Mustafa's [a nick name for Prophet Muhammad] son's [Husayn] throat was blooded (Shi'ane ALI tv, 2019).

According to a report entitled "the process of changing the flag during the previous regime and after toppling of the regime of Saddam Hussein" published in September (2019), the flag changing ritual used to be performed without a ceremony, in secrecy, but after 2003, the ceremony was introduced for the first time in an organised manner (al-Musawi, 2019).

Figure 5 *Crowds gather at the shrine of Imam Husayn (Source*; *Imam Hussein Holy Shrine /Photo Gallery)*

Figure 6 *Ceremonial flag changing: taking the red flag down (Source*; *Imam Hussein Holy Shrine /Photo Gallery)*

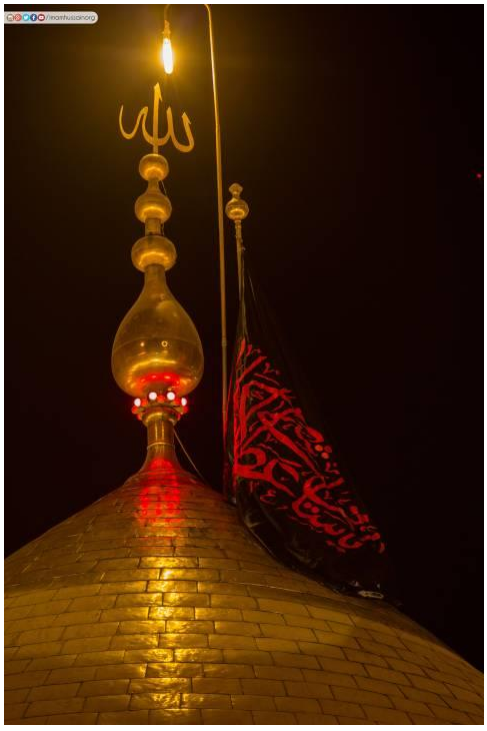


Figure 7 *Ceremonial flag changing: putting up the mourning flag (Source*; *Imam Hussein Holy Shrine /Photo Gallery)*

6.1.2 Memorial services on the first ten days of Muharram: recalling the tragedy

As part of conducting content analysis of materials related to 'Ashura rituals, I watched, listened, and took notes of memorial services conducted during the first ten days of Muharram by many Iraqi religious leaders, including Sayyid Hossein Qazwini and Sayyid 'Ali Al-Talqani. Some of these memorial services were posted on the religious leaders' websites, YouTube and Twitter accounts (see Appendix 5). Based on my examination of these materials, during the first ten days of Muharram, memorial services are held daily at religious places (or even homes) in Karbala and other cities, narrating the journey of Husayn and also focusing on Husayn's companions killed in the battle at Karbala, according to their day of martyrdom. There are two main parts in these memorial services: sermons in which a reciter narrates the theme of the day, and the *niyahah* or lamentation poetry, where reading elegies with rhythms inciting participants to observe *latum*. The dominant theme during the first day is concerned with the events of Husayn's departure from his homeland (Medina) and his reasons for refusing obedience to Yazid's *caliphate*. On the second night, the prevailing theme is Husayn' arrival Karbala grounds. During these first two days, the narrative focuses on setting the stage, contextualising the battle of Karbala. Stories such as this are recited:

> It had been a few days since the water supply was cut off by the enemy. Children were crying for water, the women were desperate for water, Zainul-Aba'deen, the son of Imam Husayn … was sick with fever. The suffering from the thirst was too painful to bear (al-Talqani, 2018a).

The next five days, the focus of the rituals is on Muslim ibn Aqeel, Husayn's ambassador to Kufa, and other companions, including Habeeb ibn Mudhaher, Burair and al-Hurr. These five days are very emotional for participants, because the rituals focus shifts on the killing of Husayn's close relatives including his brother Abbas. The sixth day is assigned to the commemoration of Husayn's nephew, al-Qasim ibn al-Hassan, a young man who was preparing for his wedding before he was killed at Karbala. On the seventh day, Abbas is remembered. The story of Abbas provokes high emotions among participants, given his close relation with his stepbrother Husayn and also because of the way he was killed. According to the narration, he suffered tremendously trying to protect his brother and the women and children in Husayn's camp (al-Talqani, 2018b). Emotions further increase on the eighth day, because the reciter narrates the scene of Husayn's witnessing the killing

of his own son, ‘Ali al-Akber, who is presented as the obedient son to his father who sacrificed himself to defend his family and religion.

As the day of ‘Ashura nears, more intense and darker stories are passionately narrated. For example, part of the story recited on the eighth of Muharram concerning the killing of ‘Ali al-Akber is as follows:

> ‘Ali al-Akber, Husayn's son, obtained permission to fight and dashed toward the enemy. He engaged them in fierce fighting, falling on them like thunder, slaying numerous fighters. He continued to move forward, deep inside the enemy. The enemy was overpowering in number, it overwhelmed him cutting him with swords and spears, and his body became nothing but wounds gushing blood, until he died (al-Talqani, 2018c).

The ninth day of memorial services is assigned to the infant, ‘Abdullah, Husayn’s own son, who was also killed in the battle of Karbala (al-Talqani, 2018d). By the end of the ninth night, the Shi’a are reminded of all major historical events which underscore the suffering of Husayn’s camp in Karbala.

6.1.3 The day of ‘Ashura: the day of rage

Emotions are extremely high, and the mourning rituals take a more visible and public form on the day of ‘Ashura. Content analysis shows that although public processions take place in different villages, communities and cities in Iraq, Karbala becomes the principle location for commemorating the killing of Husayn. I identified the major rituals practiced in Karbala on ‘Ashura day: the recitation of *al-Maqtal* at the shrine of Husayn, *rikdhet Tweareej* or the *Tweareej* run, processions and *tashabih*. My examination of the mourning rituals, which take part on the day of ‘Ashura, demonstrates that there is no strict timetable for the start and end of these rituals, and often some of these rituals overlap, for example thousands of people may be gathered inside the Shrine of Husayn for recitation of *al-Maqtal*, while simultaneously processions of *tatbir* are taking place outside the shrine. In addition, on the day of ‘Ashura, the Shi’a read *ziyarat ‘Ashura,* a Shi‘a salutatory prayer to Husayn and the martyrs of the Battle of Karbala (Fakhr-Rohani, 2018). According to the website of Imam Hussein Holy Shrine:

> Everybody can pay a ziarat [*ziyarat*] unto Imam al-Husayn [Husayn] from anywhere. Such a ziarat [*ziyarat*] can be performed in situ at Karbala [sic] or from afar at the virtual pilgrim's residence. The point is that paying ziarat [*ziyarat*] unto

> the Infallible Imam Husayn must not be forgotten or underestimated at any rate, for this is a right of Allah the almighty that everybody must discharge their utmost respect toward Imam Husayn (Fakhr-Rohani, 2018).

In the following sections, the major ritualised practices observed on ‘Ashura day are discussed.

6.1.3.1 The recitation of *al-Maqtal* in the Shrine of Husayn in Karbala

The day of ‘Ashura is the pinnacle of the *majlis*, in which participants listen to the *al-Maqtal*, a detailed account of the tragedy of Karbala that ended with the killing of Husayn. *Al-Maqtal* is broadcast live on Iraqi TV, and on Shi‘a sponsored satellite channels including Karbala, Al-Anwar, and Al-Ahd, and is also available on YouTube channels (see Appendix 5). I watched, listened, and took notes of the *al-Maqtal* conducted in 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019, recited by number of religious leaders. Based on my examination of the materials collected, *al-Maqtal*, which is held at the shrine of Husayn, is the most important and best attended memorial service. The rituals start in the morning when the story of Husayn’s killing is read by a reciter who excels in this area. The position requires a reciter who possesses special characteristics such as passion, a strong voice, and the ability to make participants cry. The attendees, gender-segregated, listen attentively whilst expressing utmost sadness. Some of the early parts of the *al-Maqtal* detail the suffering endured by Husayn’s camp, such as the following:

> Imam Husayn … rushed to the area and picked up the wounded limp body and brought it to the appalled camp. His sister and others in the camp were horrified and shocked at the scene. Abbas and five other brothers of Imam Husayn went to fight. They also engaged the enemy in a fierce fighting, almost doing the impossible. Abbas went toward the river to bring some water for the thirsty children. While he was returning on his horse with the water, he was attacked by a large horde of the enemy, overwhelming and severely wounding him. As much as he tried Abbas could not save the water, he fell from his horse to breath his last (al -Hakeem, 2008).

When the story comes to the point when the killer, Shimr ibn Thil-Jawshan, repeatedly stabs Husayn and beheads him, immediately the women start to wail and weep whilst hitting their faces with both hands. The reciter stops, and weeps. Men weep too, but the majority observe *latum*. This usually lasts a couple of minutes and then all the men and women sob intermittently until the end of the story. This part of *al-Maqtal* is narrated as follows:

> Imam Husayn … was alone, one man against thousands. He took them on, fighting them bravely, and kept fighting, receiving many wounds in the process. Thousands of enemy fighters were surrounding him but none dared to move toward him. The silence was broken when Shimr screamed for an attack, and then screamed again, threatening, and in response they attacked collectively, and one sword fell on Imam Husayn's left wrist and deeply cut his left hand. The blood gushed like a fountain (al- Hakeem, 2008).

And towards the end, the story unfolds as follows:

> It was at this point, that Shimr, whose mother was a disbeliever, came forward and severed Imam Husayn's noble head from the body, the noble head kissed often by the Prophet… Shimr and others had the audacity to carry it on the tip of a spear to Yazid, 600 miles away. Umar ibn Saa'd ordered the horsemen to trample upon the supine bodies of Imam Husayn and all others killed, to disfigure them even further, as if the wounds, the bloodied bodies, and the headless forms were not enough (al-Hakeem, 2008).

I estimate that thousands of attendees sit, chin down, and listen to the *al-Maqtal* through loudspeakers but often people react to the story and even interrupt the reciter expressing outrage and sometimes chanting 'Oh, thirsty', or 'Oh, oppressed', or 'Oh, martyr' whilst observing *latum*. In the background, the sounds of trumpets can be heard, and the chants of "Hayder…Hayder" that come from *al-Tatbir* processions outside the shrine. In addition, and according to my own estimation, there are thousands more mourners outside the Shrine (see Figure 8).

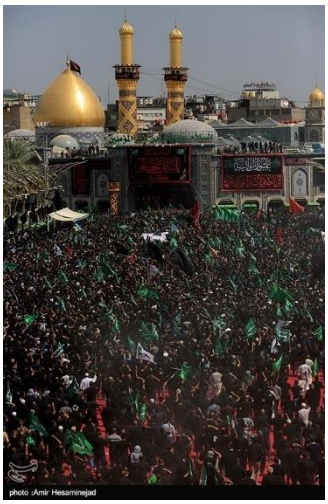


Figure 8 *Participants outside the Shrine of Imam Husayn reacting to al-Maqtal* (*Source*; *Imam Hussein Holy Shrine/Photo Gallery*)

This memorial service of *al-Maqtal*, marks the end of ten days of memorial services, observed on the first ten days of Muharram, that are crucial for reminding the Shi'a about what happened in the battle of Karbala in 680.

6.1.3.2 ***Rikdhet*** **Tweareej**

On the day of 'Ashura, people gather at a district named Tweareej to run in panic towards Karbala and into the Husayn shrine, and then to the close-by Abbas Shrine, after the noon prayer (Hamed, 2018; Jasim, 2013). This ceremony replicates what purportedly occurred in 680, which was that when people heard the news that Husayn was under attack, they rushed to help, but they arrived too late. Husayn had already been killed. Usually, a group of the religious and tribal leaders lead the *rikdhet* Teareej. The participants start running or trotting while hitting their heads and chanting "*Ya* Husayn… *Ya* Husayn" (Oh Husayn… Oh Husayn), and *Abd wala'ah ma nen'sa Husaynah* "By Allah, we shall never forget Husayn" (Hamed, 2018). According to the official website of the Shrine of Imam Hussein, it is estimated that approximately three million Shi'a Iraqis observed the *rikdhet* Tweareej or the *Tweareej* run in 2016 (Hamed, 2018) (see Figure 9).

Figure 9 *Rikdhet Tweareej* (*Source*; *Imam Hussein Holy Shrine /Photo Gallery*)

6.1.3.3 Processions

Numerous processions also take place on the day of ‘Ashura, especially in Karbala. Based on my examination of many processions that were made available on social media and satellite TV channels, including Al-Ahd, Al-Noujaba, and Al-Forat (see Appendix 5), most Shi‘a neighbourhoods, cities, religious institutions, and some Shi‘a political parties and militias organise *mawakib* that carry the name of the sponsor of the *mawkib* (singular of *mawakib*). On the day of ‘Ashura, four main types of *mawakib al-‘Aza* take place: *al-Latum*, *al-Zangeel*, *al-Tatbir* and *mawakib al-Khidmah.* Except for *mawakib al-Tatbir*, all other *mawakib* are also practiced on the fortieth day after ‘Ashura. I observed many of these *mawakib* during my fieldwork in Karbala in 2016.

Mawkib al-Latum (Procession of Chest Beating) is comprised of groups of men who hit their chests either with one hand or both while repeating some couplets (see Figure 10). The poems differ from one procession to another, but their essence is about revitalising painful images from the Karbala battle. The number of participants vary.

Figure 10 *Mawkib al- Latum*
(*Source*; *Imam Hussein Holy Shrine/Photo Gallery*)

In addition to *mawakib al-Latum,* numerous *mawakib al-Zangeel* take place in Karbala on ‘Ashura day. *Zanjeel* in the Arabic language means chain. The one that is typically used in the *mawakib al-Zangeel* is comprised of a group of chains of a certain length that end with a wooden handle (see Figure 11) used by participants to hit their backs. *Mawakib al-Zanjeel* starts largely after the 5th day of Muharram and peaks on the day of ‘Ashura and during *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* (AlKafeel Network, 2018, 2015).

Figure 11 *Mawakib al-zangeel*
(*Source*; *Imam Hussein Holy Shrine/Photo Gallery*)

As for *mawakib al-Tatbir* (see Figure 12), which are regarded as the most violent of ‘Ashura the rituals and observed mostly in Karbala, participants strike their heads with a form of sharp object such as a ‘sword’ or knife causing blood to flow (Shi‘a Scholars’ Fatwas on Tatbir, 2018). In a very dramatic and visible way, these processions prepare to perform *tatbir* rituals in Karbala in the early morning of the tenth day of Muharram. A procession leaves with all its members wearing

the *cafan* or white shroud that is traditionally used in Islam to cover a deceased person before burial signifying their willingness to die (al-Sawaf, 2008). They also carry their daggers and swords, waving them in the air in a show of power similar to practices done before waging a battle to motivate the fighters and frighten the enemies' hearts (Al-Abieath, 2017). At dawn on the tenth of Muharram, processions of *al-Tatbir* begin with participants performing the ritual. Hundreds of these processions pass through the streets of Karbala while participants knife their shaved heads, turning their white shrouds red with blood. As they parade to the sounds of trumpets and drums on roads leading to Husayn's shrine, they chant "Hayder…Hayder ('Oh lion', an epithet for Imam ''Ali, Husayn's father)" (Al-Abieath, 2017, p. 195). Crowds of men and women line up alongside the roads, watching them pass by.

Figure 12 *Mawakib al-Tatbir*
(*Source*; *Imam Hussein Shrine/Photo Gallery*)

In addition to these three types of *mawakib al-'Aza; mawakib al-Latum, mawakib al-Zangeel,* and *mawakib al-Tatbir,* numerous *mawakib al-Khidmah* take place on the day of 'Ashura to provide necessary services for the visitors of Karbala, including the provision of food, bedding and places

to rest. According to the website of Imam Hussein Holy Shrine (2017), members of these *mawakib* proudly refer to themselves as *kedam al Husayn* or servants of Husayn, believing that they will be rewarded by Husayn for supporting his visitors (al-Sabag, 2017).

Overall, according to the official website of Imam Hussein Holy Shrine (2015), most large Iraqi cities with a sizable number of Shi‘a residents now encourage the registration of all *mawakib* before they hold their activities, although there is no law making this compulsory (al-Qadi, 2015). The size of the *Mawkib* can be anywhere from several dozen to several thousand Shi‘a mourners, parading in the streets holding banners and, in some cases, carrying models of the mausoleum of the martyrdom of Husayn and his followers (al-Abieath, 2017). Generally, numerous men, women, and children follow behind these mausoleum models, flanking both sides of the procession (al-Abieath, 2017).

6.1.3.4 Tashabih

On the day of ‘Ashura, the tragedy of Karbala is re-enacted in the form of a play (*tashabih*) and performed by amateur actors in its near-original geographical context to seek a measure of realism (al-Abieath, 2017). The *tashabih* is also practiced in other cities and communities. The sponsor pays for all necessary materials including costumes, horses and camels, and the stage. As shown in Figure 13, the costumes respect the colour coding of Shi‘a ritual theatre – green for Imams and *ahl al-bayt* (al-Abieath, 2017). The site, customs, and flags, all work together to present active and influential symbols to help the audience visualise the battle, which in turn ignites and evokes emotions in the participants and spectators, who are estimated to be in the thousands (al-Saryfi, 2017). All the events of the battle are retold and depicted, including Husayn’s reaction to the killing of his infant son in Karbala (see Figure 14). The re-enactment of the battle is made all the more dramatic by the ritual of burning the tent of Husayn’s camp (see Figure 15) and of taking captive the womenfolk of Husayn’s camp (see Figure 16). The ritual of burning tent is significant not only in the sense to evoke emotions of the audience by depicting the terrifying moments experienced by the women and children in Husayn’s camp, but to emphasise that from that point the intent was to erase all evidence of the battle of Karbala (alnaeem.tv, 2018).

Figure 13 *re-enacting the battle of Karbala* (*tashabih*)
(*Source*; *Imam Hussein Shrine/Photo Gallery*)

Figure 14 *An actor playing the character of Imam Husayn*
(*Source*; *Imam Hussein Shrine/Photo Gallery*)

Figure 15 *The ritual of burning the tent of Husayn's camp*
(*Source*; *Imam Hussein Shrine/Photo Gallery*)

Figure 16 *A scene showing a member of the Yazid army taking women and children captive*
(*Source*; *Imam Hussein Shrine/Photo Gallery*)

According to the website of Imam Hussein Holy Shrine (2018), after burning the tents, Karbala residents and visitors observe a candle-lit procession during the night of estrangement (see Figure

17), which is held on Muharram 10th to commemorate Husayn's martyrdom and his family's captivity. Men, women and children participate in this procession carrying candles and repeating chants of elegies. The website of the Shrine of Imam Husayn publishes many photos showing the procession passing through the streets of Karbala and some historic sites associated with the battle, such as *Al-til Al-Zainabi* (Zainabite Hill) which is the place where Zainab, Husayn's sister, was believed to have stood during the battle; the sacred place where Abbas' hands were cut off during the battle, and the shrines of Husayn and Abbas. The candle-lit procession is significant in the sense that it highlights the vulnerability of Zainab whilst facing the killers of her brothers. Also, this ritual signifies a shift in focus from Husayn to his sister Zainab (Imam Hussein Holy Shrine, 2018).

Figure 17 *Candle procession in the night of estrangement*
(*Source*; *Imam Hussein Shrine/Photo Gallery*)

The website of the Shrine of Imam Hussain (2012) reports that each year, on Muharram 13th, some Iraqi tribes organise a procession on the occasion of the third day after Husayn's death, which is also known as *Yawm Al-Dafn*. It refers to the day Husayn's body was buried. The procession passes through Qibleh Street, which leads them to Husayn's shrine, and then goes on to the shrine of

Abbas. Essentially, from the beginning of Muharram until the fourteenth of this month, Karbala re-lives the tragedy of the killing of Husayn in 680.

6.1.4 Ziyarat al-Arba‘in

The Holy Shrine of Imam Hussein notes that visiting the shrine of Imam Husayn, preferably on foot, is annually practiced on the 40th day after ‘Ashura, on the 20th of Safar (al-Safaar, 2018). The day of *al-Arba‘in* is also known as *maradd al-Ras*, or the Return of the Head (al-Safaar, 2018). This day is significant because it is believed that Husayn’s head, which had been taken to Damascus to be shown to Yazid, the Umayyad Caliph, was returned and buried with his body in Karbala. In addition, this day signifies the return of the women who had been taken captive after the killing of Husayn, to Karbala (al-Safaar, 2018). Upon their return, the women, including Zainab, Husayn’s sister, practised mourning rituals at the burial place of Husayn along with other Muslims, including those who regretted not defending him at the Battle of Karbala. Given the Shi‘a tendency to follow the tradition of *ahl al-bayt*, Zainab herself being one of them, the custom of *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* started on this particular day (al-Safaar, 2018).

As noted earlier, I observed *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* in Karbala. Many Shi‘a Iraqis and Shi‘a from further afield walk to Karbala from different towns and cities, especially from Najaf, on foot, *mashaya* (see Figure 18). When they arrive at the shrine of Husayn, visitors follow rituals called *adab al-Ziyara* or The Customs of Visitation when they visit the shrines of Husayn and Abbas (Husayn’s stepbrother). Many Shi‘a religious leaders including the grand *marja‘* in Iraq ‘Ali al-Sistani, post *adab al-Ziyara* on their website. It instructs visitors of Imam Husayn shrine to adhere to the following: visitors have to be physically clean in body and wear clean clothes and should show respect and humbleness before entering the shrine. In addition, they must ask permission from Allah, the Prophet, and the *Imam* they are visiting to go through the gates (al-Sistani, 2018). During my fieldwork in Karbala, I noticed that once inside the shrine, people tend to stand as close as possible to the tomb, performing a prayer, reading the Quran, praying for repentance, asking forgiveness for sins, and carrying out an invocation to ask for blessings and support. Usually, the latter elicits an emotional response, reducing many pilgrims to tears. After this, visitors recite the ‘*ziyara* Prayer’, which is practised only during visitations. In this invocation, the Shi‘a symbolically affirm to Husayn that they are on his side, denouncing his killers and those who have

justified the killing, as well as anyone who has heard about the tragedy of Karbala and not condemned it.

On the day of *al-Arba'in*, numerous *mawakib* are performed in Karbala in particular, including *mawakib al- Latum* and *mawakib al-Zangeel*, as well as *mawakib al-Khidmah*.

Figure 18 *Walkers on their way to Karbala*
(*Source*; *Imam Hussein Shrine/Photo Gallery*)

At this point, and in order to clarify, the following table (Table 1) provides an overall view of the main ritualised practices examined in this thesis including date, location, cities where they are held, and my estimate of the number of participants based on my observation and content analysis.

Table 1 *An overall view of the main ritualised practices examined in this thesis*

Ritual type	Major ritualised practices involved	Dates	Location	Cities	Number of participants
Ceremony of flag Changing	Changing the flag on the dome of the shrine of Imam	The first night of Muharram	Shrine of Imam Husayn	Karbala	Estimated in 1000s

	Husayn from red to black, chanting, *latum*, and wearing black				
Memorial services	Crying, *latum*, wearing black, and serving food	Throughout the year but they climax during the first ten days of Muharram, then around the fortieth	Mainly conducted at homes, *husseiniyahs*, and shrines of Imams	Karbala, other shrine cities, Baghdad, other Iraqi cities, and Shi‘a communities around the globe	Varies
Ziyarat ‘Ashura	Visiting the shrine of Husayn, reading *Ziyarat ‘Ashura*, crying, and wearing black	On ‘Ashura day	The shrines of Husayn and his bother Abbas	Karbala	Varies
Ziyarat al-Arba‘in	Visiting the shrine of Husayn, reading *Ziyarat al-Arba‘in* , crying, *latum*, and wearing black	On the fortieth day	The shrine of Husayn and his bother Abbas	Karbala	Varies
Mashaya	Walking to Karbala for *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*, carrying flags, and wearing black.	Some people start the journey two weeks before the day of the fortieth	Main roads leading to Karbala from different Iraqi towns and cities	Communities, towns and villages and different cities in Iraq.	Estimated in millions
Mawakib al-‘Aza	*Latum*, chanting, carrying flags, and wearing black	Mostly on ‘Ashura day, and then around the fortieth	Main roads.	Karbala, other shrine cities, Baghdad,	Estimated in 10, 000s

				other Iraqi cities, and Shi‘a communities	
Mawakib al-Tatbir	*Tatbir(*flagellation*)*	On ‘Ashura day	Shrine of Imams	Karbala and other shrine cities.	Estimated in 1000s
Mawakib al-Zangeel	Zangeel (flagellation)	Mostly on ‘Ashura day and the day of the fortieth	Shrine of Imams	Karbala and other shrine cities	Estimated in 1000s.
Mawakib al-Khidmah	providing services (free of charge) including food, water, tea, and places to rest.	Mostly on ‘Ashura day, and then around the fortieth	Main roads leading to Karbala from different Iraqi towns and cities	Karbala, other shrine cities, Baghdad, other Iraqi cities, and Shi‘a communities around the globe.	Estimated in 10,000s
Cooking for charity	Cooking, and wearing black.	Throughout the two month mourning period but intensify around ‘Ashura day and the fortieth.	Homes, *husseiniyahs*, and public places including roads, and parks.	Karbala and other shrine cities, Baghdad and other Iraqi cities, and Shi‘a communities around the globe.	Estimated in 10,000s
Rikdhet Tweareej: (*Tweareej* run)	Jogging, carrying flags, chanting, wearing blacks (male only)	‘Ashura day	Main roads from a town called Qantarat Al-Salam to Husayn’s shrine	Karbala	Estimated in millions
Tent burning	Lighting fire to tents	‘Ashura day	A site which is believed to be where Husayn stationed in 680	Karbala	Estimated in 100s

Overall, as shown in the previously presented Figure 4, the mourning rituals peak around ‘Ashura day and the day of the fortieth. As a preliminary step, exploring the way contemporary ‘Ashura rituals progress, highlighting the main ritualised practices involved in the commemoration of ‘Ashura especially when the rituals peak on ‘Ashura day and the day of *al-Arba‘in*, helps organise the data for exploring rituals’ strength, their strategic use, symbolic meanings of rituals and social outcomes, all of which is discussed in the following sections.

6.2 Theme results from Observation and Content Analysis

Data collected at this stage are based on my observation of *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* in Karbala as a primary researcher, which included a trip from Baghdad to Karbala and a visit to Najaf and Al-Kadhemiyya, two of the shrine cities. It is also based on content analysis of materials related to ‘Ashura rituals, which involved contents posted on formal media and social media, such as video clips posted online or streamed through satellite channels, posts and comments on Twitter and Facebook, online articles, and readers’ commentary provided on the subject of the commemoration of ‘Ashura. As noted in Chapter Five, data analysis is organised in four categories: ritual strength, strategic use of ‘Ashura rituals, symbolic meanings of rituals, and social outcomes of commemorating ‘Ashura.

6.2.1 Ritual Strength

To determine the overall strength of ‘Ashura rituals, particular attention was paid to the four key theoretical components of SRT: salience, homologous-ness, repetitiveness and resources.

6.2.1.1 Salience

The examination of the mourning ritualised practices shows that *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* is the most visible form for the following reasons: the nature of the journey to Karbala (mainly on foot, *mashaya*); the numerous participants, who are in their millions when they arrive at Karbala, and the significant distances covered, which in some cases involve starting the walk to Karbala weeks before the day of the fortieth (see Table Two).

Table 2 Distance from major Iraqi cities to Karbala

City	Distance to Karbala (km)
Hilla	45
Najaf	83
Baghdad	103
Diwaniyah	125
Wasit	133
Al Anbar	145
Diyala	160
Samawa	214
Samarra	231
Nasiriya	315
Umara	355
Kirkuk	369
Sulaymaniyah	407
Irbil	459
Mosul	487
Basra	490
Dahuk	566

My travel to Karbala on the 16th November 2016, to observe *ziyarat al-Arba'in* involved walking, as well as a number of bus rides. The passengers on my bus were all Shi'a travelling the 103 kilometres south from Baghdad to Karbala. On both sides of the route we took, there were huge numbers of walkers. Some women wore traditional black cloaks and put green bands on their heads. I also observed that many walkers were carrying flags in different colours, green, red and black which further enhance their visibility. Each colour has its own symbolic meaning. Green is the colour of Islam, red flags refer to martyrdom, sacrifice, blood, and revenge, and black flags refer to mourning and loss (Imam Hussein Holy Shrine, 2018).

Many walkers came from far-away communities and the only option for them is to walk on the major roads leading to Karbala, causing severe traffic jam and road closures. Their act of walking on major roads carrying 'Ashura flags is very visible. Along the way to Karbala, from Baghdad, I noticed that many private vehicles raise small 'Ashura flags to clearly declare themselves as mourners of Imam Husayn. I also noticed 'Ashura flags and *Husseinite* images (visual materials that represent the battle of Karbala) hung on the facades of houses, shops, and even government offices. These images represent imagined pictures of Imam Husayn and some of his family

members who were killed with him in Karbala. *Husseinite* images and flags remain hanging for the duration of ‘Ashura and *al-Arba‘in*.

Travelling by bus was a convoluted task, due to road blockages, the absence of officials to direct and/or redirect traffic heading to Karbala, and no proper signage or reliable information to inform drivers about the status of the roads. As a result, navigating roads depended mainly on the driver’s knowledge of alternative routes. My journey to Karbala involved passing through numerous Sunni areas. Whilst on the bus, we went through many checkpoints run by *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi* (Popular Mobilization Forces). With many vehicles and many checkpoints, the road was blocked.

Based on my own observation, contributing to the salience of *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* is the extensive number of *mawakib al-khidmah* where free food, fruits, dates, water, tea, and coffee are generously offered (Observation, 16 November, 2016). In addition, the presence of people who serve the pilgrims, *mawakib al-Khidmah* (processions of service) was overwhelming. The generosity and the hospitality of Shi‘a Iraqis was very noticeable during *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*, in Shi‘a communities and Shrine cities, especially Karbala, further enhancing the salience of *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*. On my way to Karbala from Baghdad, and whilst in Karbala, I noticed that many Iraqis offer their houses for strangers to rest overnight and offer food and water. There are also many other services, particularly for *mashaya* (walkers) including massages, shoe repair and polishing, fixing wheelchairs and baby strollers, washing clothes, and providing medical assistance. In fact, one of the main talking points for those who have undertaken the walk to Karbala are the extensive facilities designed to serve the visitors of Imam Husayn (observation, 16 November, 2016).

Based on the examination of related material on social media, when *mashaya* reflect on their experience on social media, they emphasise the quantities of free food offered and the generosity of Iraqis. The majority of those who observe *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* are not only shocked by the free food offered but by “pushy” Iraqis who try very hard to invite people to eat and rest. This experience is clearly reflected on social media, in the following two tweets shown in Figure 19 and 20.

Figure 19 *An individual reflects on the generosity and the hospitality of Iraqis (Source; Twitter)*

Figure 20 *Another individual reflects on the generosity and the hospitality of Iraqis (Source; Twitter)*

On my way to Karbala, I also observed that it is very common for the Shi'a to practice the rituals of outdoor (public) cooking of traditional food (see Figure 21), which generates a lot of excitement given that it symbolises an open invitation for all to eat this 'blessed' food. I noticed that some people prefer to cook overnight whilst others prefer to cook during the day (Observation, 16-21 November, 2016). I also noticed that it is very common for people to walk or drive around with empty containers (or pots) and when they see people cooking outside, they stop. After exchanging greetings, food is offered to them. In many cases, roads are entirely closed to facilitate this outdoor ritual.

Figure 21 *A very common scene where volunteers cook for visitors of Karbala* (*Source*; *Imam Hussein Shrine/Photo Gallery*)

I arrived in Karbala just before midnight of the 16th of November. Vehicles could not get into the city due to security concerns, so the bus dropped us off on the outskirts of the city. The city felt alive. Major roads were very busy with pedestrians, people were offering free food and tea on either side of the road, and lots of people were just sitting on the side of the road socialising. Locals who are from Karbala informed me that, for its prominence, "*ziyarat al-Arba'in* puts Karbala on the map" (field notes, November, 2016). In addition, I noticed an extensive number of mourning processions in the city on their way to the shrine of Husayn and Abbas even before the day of *al-Arba'in*. I was informed by locals that was normal, given the limited capacity of the city of Karbala

to accommodate numerous visitors, and that the processions start to arrive a few days before the anniversary of *al-Arba'in* (observation, 16 November). According to the Department of Hussainian Liturgy and Processions of the Imam Hussain and Abbas Shrines, a total of 10,714 processions from 25 countries took place in 2018 in Karbala. Two years earlier, I observed that when approaching the shrine of Husayn, the rituals practised in the processions intensify, with participants expressing allegiance to Husayn and then leaving the shrine to allow others to participate. The size and composition of the crowds and participants in Karbala enhances the salience of *ziyarat al-Arba'in* and makes it the most visible form of 'Ashura rituals. I also noticed many foreign visitors in Karbala, coming from Middle Eastern countries or from the West, with the majority being from Iran. Normally, due to lack of security and terrorist threats, Iraq is not regarded as a tourist destination. This changes, however, during *ziyarat al-Arba'in* where many foreigners can be seen in different Shi'a dominated Iraqi cities, especially the shrine cities and Baghdad, contribute to the salience of *ziyarat al-Arba'in*.

I left Karbala on the 21st of November but I learned from other visitors that they were planning to stay longer in Karbala to avoid traffic jams. On the way back to Baghdad, all major roads were jammed due to the extensive number of visitors leaving at the end of *ziyarat al-Arba'in* and also because the overwhelming number of visitors who walked to Karbala, used public or private means of transportation to go back to their towns and cities.

6.2.1.2 Homologous-ness

In terms of homologous-ness, or the degree of perceived similarity among different ritualised practices, the examination of the contemporary form of 'Ashura rituals shows that all of the mourning rituals of 'Ashura are similar but not equal in terms of creating or supporting a mourning environment to commemorate the tragedy of Karbala. 'Ashura rituals can be broadly categorised into two, not mutually exclusive, categories: serving and mourning. People who take the responsibilities to serve the mourners are called *kedea'm* al-Husayn or the servants of Husayn (observation, 16-23 November, 2016). Many people who were serving the visitors of Karbala explained to me that they believe that their supportive role is vital to the commemoration and that subsequently they will be rewarded by the Imam, Husayn. On this basis, I grouped *mawakib Al-Khidmah* (processions of service) and the rituals of cooking under the serving category, whilst the

rest of the rituals including *majalis al-'Aza, mawakib Al-Aza, mawakib Al-Tatbir, mawakib al-Zangeel, ziyarat* 'Ashura and *ziyarat al-Arba'in*, and *tashabih* fall within the mourning category.

Even within the mourning category, my examination of contemporary 'Ashura rituals shows that not all rituals are similar. Within the mourning category, I established two major themes: violent rituals (*mawakib al-Tatbir* and *mawakib al-Zangeel*); and non-violent rituals (mourning processions, memorial services, *Rikdhet* Tweareej, *mashaya*, flag changing ceremony and *tashabih*). The idea behind the violent rituals, *mawakib al-Tatbir* and *mawakib al-Zangeel*, is the re-enactment of the battle of Karbala through physical torture of one's own body and shedding of blood to share the suffering of Husayn (al-Modarresi, 2013). The aim of the non-violent rituals is to enhance the spiritual experience of participants. Overall, each one of the 'Ashura rituals contributes, in its own way to creating a mourning environment to commemorate Husayn's killing.

6.2.1.3 Repetitiveness

The third theoretical element of SRT, repetitiveness, refers to the relative frequency with which a ritualised practice is performed. As noted earlier, there is a sequence for 'Ashura rituals that spans almost two months. Some of the rituals such as memorial services and mourning processions are more repetitive than other rituals, such as the flag changing ceremony, *ziyarat* 'Ashura and *al-Arba'in*, and also violent rituals, which are only observed once a year, on specific dates. It also happens that the rituals assigned to specific dates tend to be observed mainly in Karbala. Once a year, the commemoration of 'Ashura starts with the powerful flag changing ceremony on the night of Muharram in the shrine of Husayn in Karbala. Also, once a year, *ziyarat* 'Ashura is observed on the day of 'Ashura, and *ziyarat al-Arba'in* is observed on the fortieth day, in Karbala. Similarly, *mawakib al-Tatbir* and *mawakib al-Zangeel*, are mainly practiced on the day of 'Ashura and the day of *al-Arba'in* in Karbala.

Following the sequence of 'Ashura rituals, after the flag changing ceremony, memorial services are held during the first ten days of Muharram. These rituals, however, as the examination of materials related to memorial services shows, are also observed regularly throughout the two month mourning period in private homes and in *husseiniyahs*, in different communities in Iraq, and in shrine cities including Karbala. The rationale behind it is that the Shi'a are encouraged to express grief over Husayn at any time (Imam Hussein Holy Shrine, 2018). The notion that

memorial services are not confined to Karbala contributes to their repetitiveness. Memorial services are also considered manageable in terms of organisation and resources, which can also count as a factor supporting their repetitiveness.

I examined many religious leaders' social media platforms, and Twitter official accounts of Holy Shrines in Karbala, Najaf, Samarra, and in the Kadhemiyya. The analysis also shows that memorial services are spread throughout the year to commemorate the deaths of other Imams and members of *ahl al-bayt*. For example, in addition to the two mourning months of Muharram and Safar, on 25th of the seventh month of the Islamic calendar, Rajab, memorial services and processions are conducted in Baghdad and other cities to commemorate the death of the martyrdom of the seventh Imam, Musa ibn Ja'far also known as Musa al-Kadhim (see Figures 22 and 23).

Figure 22 *A tweet shows people serving the visitors of the Seventh Imam in Baghdad (Source: Twitter)*

Figure 23 *A tweet shows the commemoration of the death of the Seventh Imam at his shrine in al-Kadhemiyya (Source: Twitter)*

Also, memorial services are widely held in different Shi‘a communities to commemorate the death of Fatima (see Figures 24 and 25), the daughter of the Prophet and Husayn’s mother, the death Husayn’s step mother, Umm Al-Banin, and the death of Husayn’s sister, Zainab. Put succinctly, except for two months, Rabi’ al-Thani and Sha‘ban, the Shi‘a conduct memorial services throughout the year, an act that contributes to the repetitiveness of this ritual. Adding to all this, it is widely accepted for the Shi‘a to mourn the death of a family or community member by conducting memorial services commemorating the death of Husayn (Imam Hussein Holy Shrine, 2018). This allows them to include the rituals of weeping, crying, and flagellation, which are not permitted within the Shi‘a faith except when commemorating Imam Husayn.

Figure 24 *Memorial services to commemorate the death of the Prophet's daughter (Source: Twitter)*

Figure 25 *Processions to commemorate the death of the daughter of the Prophet (Source: Twitter)*

The examination of relevant views of memorial services expressed on social media shows a recurrent theme that portrays the Shi‘a as if they are always in mourning. However, such perceptions do not go unchallenged. In a tweet, as shown in Figure 26, an individual refuted the perception the Shi‘a are always in mourning noting that the Shi‘a also celebrate wholeheartedly the birth anniversary of the first Imam, ‘Ali on the 13th of Rajab; the birth anniversary of third Imam, Husayn on the 3rd of Sha‘ban; and the birth anniversary of the hidden Imam, al-Mahdi on the 15th of Sha‘ban.

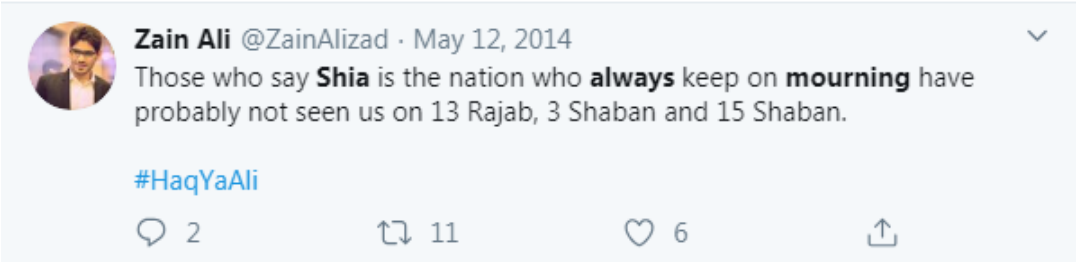


Figure 26 *An individual refuting the perception that the Shi‘a are always in mourning (Source: Twitter)*

Another element that can further contribute to the repetitiveness of the mourning rituals is their frequent broadcasting on Iraqi television, Shi‘a satellite channels, and social media. Sayyid M Modarresi, an Iraqi Shi‘a scholar and an author, for instance, in a tweet posted on 22 October (2019), praises the Ahlulbayt TV station for broadcasting the rituals that took place in Karbala. His words emphasized the importance of disseminating the message of Imam Husayn globally, as outlined in the following tweet (see Figure 27):

Figure 27 *A religious leader praises the role of media in spreading the message of 'Ashura (Source: Twitter)*

The manifestation of the commemoration of 'Ashura in cultural practices also contributes to their repetitiveness. During my field work, whilst traveling by bus or in a taxi, I noticed that drivers listen to *latumiya*, emotional poetry narrating the suffering of *ahl al-bayt* in Karbala, instead of music or radio. I also observed that there were many songs and TV shows depicting the suffering of Husayn and *ahl al-bayt* on official Iraqi TV and on Shi'a satellite channels. Also, during my fieldwork in Baghdad and Karbala, I found many stores selling CDs of *latumiya* and songs about the tragedy of Karbala. In that regard, one of the most popular and bestselling CDs is that of Shi'a eulogy reciter Basim al-Karbalaei. I noticed the popularity of this reciter; in almost all the places I visited, including restaurants and even stores selling mobile phones, his eulogies were played on CDs or on television. Iraqis joke that the Shi'a listen to Basim Karbalaei more than the Quran (field notes, Karbala, 20 November, 2016). Many individuals who I met during my fieldwork attributed the spread of the lamentation of Husayn to Basim al-Karbalaei's performance, choosing relevant and popular Iraqi cultural references, and his ability to make people emotional and cry. Al-Karbalaei is also very popular on social media, with about 100,000 followers on Twitter. For

his outstanding contribution to the popularity of the commemoration of ‘Ashura, he was rewarded by the Imam Hussein Holy Shrine. According to an article titled ‘Return of once forbidden Ashoura [‘Ashura] chants signals Shiite [Shi‘a] revival’, Abu Zeed (2013) notes that “While religious symbols, both in sight and sound, have affected the general environment, they also melted into the details of families’ private lives and have become a social tradition, in addition to a religious ritual”. Put succinctly, lamentation of Husayn which is regarded to be the core element of memorial services has become part of tradition that is not necessarily confined to the two month mourning period, an element that increase the repetitiveness of the mourning rituals. Based on the aforementioned discussion, it is reasonable to conclude that that the mourning rituals of ‘Ashura are collectively repetitive, given that they are practiced within two months of the year. In addition, some of its rituals, especially memorial services, are more often than not, practiced throughout the year.

6.2.1.4 Resources

Finally, in terms of resources, data analysis shows that there is no shortage of support for ‘Ashura rituals whether in terms of human or other resources. In Karbala, I observed that it is not only the well-to-do families and individuals who provide resources, but also low-income families and individuals, who generously support and contribute to the rituals. For example, the memorial services that I attended in Karbala and Baghdad during *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* were sponsored by community members. I was not personally invited but often the family that I was staying with in Karbala would invite me to go along with them. On the evening of the 18th of Safar (just two days before the fortieth, *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*), I attended a memorial service (male only) held at a family home in Karbala, which started around 9:00 pm local time. Around 30 people participated, including teenagers. No food was offered, and the reciter was a friend of the host who volunteered to read eulogies of Imam Husayn. On the following day, I attended another memorial service, again in a family home. This time there were between sixty and eighty people in attendance. It seemed more organised than the one I had attended the night before. Food was offered at the end: a traditional food, *harisa*, a kind of grain soup; and *qima*, a chick pea dish mixed with minced meat and spices served with rice. When I asked how much such *majlis* would have cost, I was informed that around 500 US dollars: a reciter fee can be around 200 US dollars and food can cost around 300 US dollars. The total cost was paid by the host who sponsored the *majlis*. This is not an

insignificant amount of money to spend but I was informed that, irrespective of their financial status, people are very generous when it comes to spending money on the commemoration of ‘Ashura. I also noticed that there were about 10 young men serving food and water. I was informed that they were family members, neighbours, and friends of the host, so they were not paid. Most of these people work in the private sector and save money monthly in a box called ‘al-Husayn’s Box’ (field notes, November, 2016). During ‘Ashura and *al-Arba‘in*, they use this money to spend on the provision of food, drinks and bedding, seeking only blessings from Imam Husayn, as a reward for these services.

According to a report conducted in 2018 about *mawakib al-Khidmah*, the main source of funding for a small size *mawakib* comes from participants themselves (al-Sumaria, 2018). According to the experience of one of the main informants in the report, Hussein, a 26 year old construction worker, “after long discussions, I decided with my friends and community members to create a funding account allowing us to monthly contribute 25,000 Iraqi Dinar, approximately equivalent to 20 US dollars” (al-Sumaria, 2018). Hussein adds in the report that the idea is to use the fund during *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* to provide food and services for the visitors to the shrine of Imam Husayn (al-Sumaria, 2018). Hussein notes that he has been doing this with his friends for four years, and that they usually save about 10 million Iraqi dinars, which is approximately equivalent to 850 US dollars (al-Sumaria, 2018). Hussein acknowledges that, on occasion, they also receive donations from others. They name their *mawakib* after Husayn’s older son, ‘Ali al-Akber (al-Sumaria, 2018). The idea behind this willingness to volunteer, and the generosity to donate money or food, is the perception that there will be a reward and blessing.

Whilst a relatively small-sized *mawakib*, which comprises of only a few people, depends on their own donations, large scale *mawakib* find sponsoring bodies such as merchants, wealthy individuals or prominent religious families to financially support them. Based on my observation, some tribal leaders generously finance processions. I passed by many *mawakib of al-Khidmah* and noticed visible banners indicating the names of the tribal leaders who sponsored them.

During my fieldwork in Karbala, I also learned that foreign donations are used to finance the rituals in Karbala. Shi‘a from the Gulf States including Kuwait and Bahrain, as well as Pakistanis among other make generous dominations (field notes, November, 2016). In addition, financial resources

are provided by *marja'iyya* and their representatives, particularly the shrine of Imam Husayn; the holy shrine of Abbas; Shi'a political parties; prominent Shi'a religious families in Iraq and abroad; tribal leaders; and community members. For example, according to their website, the Holy Shrine of Imam Hussein provided 300 buses in 2016 to facilitate moving visitors around. According to the same website, volunteers clean the shrines of Husayn and of Abbas, which is important given the large numbers of visitors every day. When I was in Karbala, I also learned that many Shi'a political parties contribute financially by sponsoring a number of *mawakib al-'Aza* and *al-Khidmah*. A blogger, Amiber Huda (2009), commented that the Da'wa Party, a major political party with whose members include a former Prime Minister of Iraq, donated and organised the most elaborate procession on 'Ashura day in Karbala. Whilst there are no official records of the cost of organising and sponsoring a procession, the civil activist Hawra Muhammad noted in an interview with Gulf online news agency that a relatively small sized procession cost the Iraqi government about 30,000 US dollars (al-Janabi, 2015). The activist also claims that 80% of mourning processions are sponsored and financed by the Iraqi government. In the activist's view, financing mourning processions of 'Ashura represent a form of corruption given that there is no accountability for the ways the money is spent by government agencies. This is especially relevant, in his opinion, given that Iraq in desperate need for resources and that its economy is in an undesirable state given the low oil prices, and its war on ISIS (al-Janabi, 2015).

In summary, based on the examination of relevant materials related to resources, there is no shortage of funding as many different sources provide for and finance 'Ashura rituals. The examination of the four concepts of rituals' strength shows the most powerful and visible mourning ritualised practices are associated with *ziyarat al-Arba'in*. Although not to the same extent, all of 'Ashura rituals contribute to creating a mourning environment to commemorate the killing of Husayn. Also, the mourning rituals are not confined to a day or even a week; they span almost two months with the sporadic occurrence of memorial services throughout the year. With respect to resources, the data shows that many individuals and entities contribute financially to the mourning rituals of 'Ashura. In addition to examining the strength of 'Ashura rituals, exploring whether these rituals have been used strategically is also necessary because, as noted earlier, the rituals' impact also depends on their strength and strategic use. I discuss this in the following section.

6.2.2 The strategic use of rituals

Here, I investigated the data as it relates to strategic ritualisation. To explore the strategic use of ‘Ashura rituals, I applied the four concepts of strategic ritualisation identified in SRT: ritual legitimators, ritual sponsors, ritual enforcers and ritual entrepreneurs, and I debate and discuss the influence of these agents.

Based on my observations in Karbala along with the examination of speeches and materials available on the official websites of Shi‘a religious leaders, including the official website of the office of the Grand *Marja‘* ‘Ali al-Sistani, there is enough evidence in the data to support the view that, more prominent than any other agent, the *marja‘iyya* act as a ritual legitimator, ritual sponsor, and ritual enforcer of ‘Ashura rituals. According to the website of Imam Hussein Holy Shrine, the Grand *Marja‘*, ‘Ali al-Sistani, is the most senior *marja‘* within the *marja‘iyya* in Iraq. He is the head of many Shi‘a religious teaching institutions (*al-Hawza al-‘Ilmiyya*) and *al-‘atabat al-Muqadasa* (Holy Shrines) in Iraq, including the shrines of Husayn and Abbas in Karbala. The Grand *marja‘* does not appear in public or carry out public engagements such as delivering sermons; he relies on *wukala* (representatives) to administrate all the religious institutions in Iraq (Imam Hussein Holy Shrine, 2018).

In terms of the first type of strategic use of rituals, the examination of relevant materials shows that the Shi‘a religious establishment acts as ritual legitimator. The authority to recommend ‘Ashura rituals is exemplified in al-Sistani’s response to a question posed to him, on his official website:

> Question: Is mourning for Imam Hussain [Husayn] and other Infallibles… recommended?
> Answer: Yes, it is recommended and God will reward those who sincerely revive their memories and commemorate their martyrdom.

Furthermore, the reasons for commemorating ‘Ashura are also provided on the official website of Grand Ayatullah ‘Ali al-Sistani:

> Question: What is the philosophy of *Azadari* [mourning and lamentation] for Imam Husain?
>
> Answer: There is no doubt that the tragedy of Karbala, when ascribed to the killers, is a criminal and terrible act. However, when ascribed to Husain [Husayn]…

> himself, it represents a conscious confrontation and a courageous resistance for a sacred cause. The whole nation had failed to stand up to Yazid. They had succumbed to his will, and deviation and regression towards the pre-Islamic ways were increasing.
>
> Passiveness by Husain [Husayn]… in this situation would have meant the end of Islam as we know it. Thus Husain [Husayn]… took upon himself the responsibility of the whole nation. The greatest tragedy was that one who stood up for the noblest of causes, the defense of Islam, was cut down in so cruel a manner. It is for this reason that the sacrifice of Husain [Husayn]…is commemorated annually throughout the Muslim world.

During my field work in 2016, when the threat of ISIS targeting the Shi'a was imminent, I learned that many individuals decided to save some of the money they usually spent on food for visitors of *ziyarat al-Arba'in* and to donate it instead to *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* (Popular Mobilisation Forces). There were some discussions at the place where I was staying in Karbala about the validity of such approach. In order to clarify this issue, some individuals contacted the office of al-Sistani for advice which shows that the *marja'iyya* has the authority or the power to authorise a mourning ritual or refuse to validate it (field notes, 27 November, 2016). Most of the Shi'a that I met during my fieldwork believe that only the *marja'iyya* can validate the mourning rituals of 'Ashura. A recent example brought into the discussion is the authorisation of the new ritual of the flag changing ceremony. According to a resident of Karbala, "there was not such a thing as this huge ceremony to start the mourning rituals of Muharram, they just started to occur a number of years ago, and it would not have happened without the approval of the *marja'iyya*" (field notes, 27 November, 2016). Overall, I have not found evidence to suggest that entities other than the Shi'a religious establishment have the overall authority over the mourning rituals of 'Ashura and also the power to legitimate new practices associated with them.

In terms of the second element, ritual sponsors, according to the website of Imam Husayn Holy Shrine, the *Diwan Alwagf Alsheai,* the Shi'a financing committee, is responsible for promoting, organising and financing the main rituals of 'Ashura, especially processions which take place in Karbala. According to the same website, this committee, headed by al-Sistani, was established after 2003 to manage and administrate assets belonging to the shrines of the Imams (Imam Hussein Holy Shrine, 2018). Also, the Department of Hussenite *Mawakib* [processions]Committees in Iraq appears to be in charge of coordinating different groups in terms of establishing schedules for

different processions to practice the mourning rituals inside the shrines of Husayn and Abbas (Imam Hussein Holy Shrine, 2018). The scope and jurisdictions of these committees seems not to be limited to Karbala, but the main focus is on organising and financing ‘Ashura rituals that take place in the shrines of Husayn and that of his brother Abbas because of the numerous numbers of processions there. According to the Department of Hussenite *Mawakib* Committees, more than 10,000 processions were registered to take part in *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* in 2018.

The examination of social media platforms of religious leaders shows that all *maraji‘* and *mujtahids* promote and emphasise the importance of the mourning rituals. One of the prominent *marja‘* in Iraq, Sayyid Sadiq al-Shirazi, posted a message (see Figure 28) on social media addressed to religious leaders, in which the following could be read:

> Keep the momentum of the commemoration of Husayn’s killing alive and do not let it recede even for 1%. Use your full capacity, persuasion and resources (money), to urge others to observe the rituals. You need to take an active and necessary role urge and encourage others to observe the holy mourning rituals of Husayn (Sayyid Sadiq al-Shirazi, 2018).

Whilst religious leaders promote mourning the tragedy of Husayn, they place a special interest on *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* which qualifies them, using the SRT framework terminology, as ritual enforcers. On behalf of Sayyid al-Sistani, his representative, Abd al-Mahdi al-Karbalaei, especially emphasised the importance of observing *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*, given that Iraq is battling ISIS (Shafaqna, 2015). The Holy Shrine of Abbas, for instance, tweeted (see Figure 29) that “Sayyid al-Sistani [‘Ali al-Sistani] urge everyone to cooperate to ensure in a best possible way the safety and welfare of those participating in *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*.”

Figure 28 *A marja‘ emphasising the importance of ‘Ashura rituals (Source: Twitter)*

Figure 29 *A message from al-Sistani for ziyarat al-Arba'in (Source: Twitter)*

Hadi al-Modarresi, one of Iraq's leading *mujtahids*, in a tweet dated October 2019, also described the ritual of *ziyarat al-Arba'in* as the most important ritual in our time that Allah asks Muslims to observe (see Figure 30).

Figure 30 *An Iraqi mujtahid describes ziyarat al-Arba'in as the most important ritual (Source: Twitter)*

The importance of *ziyarat al-Arba'in* has also been recently emphasised by Grand Ayatullah Sayyid Kamal al-Haydari, an Iraqi religious leader, best known for his television programmes such

as, *Debates in Beliefs and Mahdism Thesis*. In discussing ideological debates on doctrine and Islamic groups, the Grand Ayatullah compared *ziyarat al-Arba'in* to the fundamental Shi'a doctrine of the *Imamah*, the authority of the Imams, noting that "if you think of our belief as a circle with the *Imamah* at its center, and if you think of our *Sha'aer* and *Tuqoos* [rituals] as a circle, then *ziyarat al-Arba'in* is at its centre" (al-Haydari, 2018).

The examination of relevant data also shows that many young Iraqi *mujtahids* are very active in promoting *ziyarat al-Arba'in*. Most of those young *mujtahids* are educated in the West, but have connections to the *marja'iyya* in Iraq through their studies at the *hawza* in Karbala and Najaf. Sayyid Mohammad Mahdi Al-Modarressi is a prominent example of this trend. He comes from a family of *mujtahids* that includes the supreme religious jurist, *marja'* Mahdi Al-Modarressi. In one of his many tweets (see Figure 31) using the hashtag #Arbaeen [al-Arba'in], he calls *ziyarat al-Arba'in* the "most valuable religious ritual, which must be preserved and promoted" (Al-Modarressi, 2018) and urges the 'Shi'a religious establishment' to invest in it and promote it so more people can observe it.

Figure 31 *Modarresi describes ziyarat al-Arba'in as the most valuable religious ritual (Source: Twitter)*

Other relevant religious figures include Sayyid Hossein Qazwini, a teacher at the Islamic Seminary of Karbala, who was recently certified with a license of *Ijtihad* by his father, Ayatullah Qazwini. He is one of the most active *mujtahids* on social media, where he emphasised on Twitter, the rewards of observing *ziyarat al-Arba'in* (see Figure 32).

Figure 32 *Sayyid Qazwini emphasises the rewards of observing ziyarat al-Arba'in (Source: Twitter)*

The main method used to promote the rituals is to regard them as religious duty, emphasising spiritual and material rewards that might follow from Husayn's holy status and his ability to intervene on behalf of the Shi'a. According to a study done by Mohammed al-Hilli (2017), an Islamic educator and scholar, "upon doing a detailed analysis of the numerous narrations we can find over 100 benefits of this *Ziyarah* [*ziyarat al-Arba'in*] - both in this world and the hereafter". According to al-Hilli (p. 16), Imam Sadiq is reported to have said that:

> There are four thousands angels by the grave of Imam Husayn, dishevelled and covered with dust. They will cry over him until Judgment Day. Their chief is an angel named Mansur. These angels welcome all who come to the Ziyarat of Imam Husayn and accompany them when they bid farewell to Imam Husayn, visit them if they become ill and pray for them at their funerals when they die and seek forgiveness from them after their death. The emphasis on the rewards for observing *ziyarat al-Arba'in* is widely reverberated on social media.

Within the structure of the Shi'a religious establishment, the examination of relevant materials shows that it is not only the higher religious figures who promote the commemoration of 'Ashura rituals, but also other agents such *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* (Popular Mobilization Forces), a force created by al-Sistani, which invest heavily in participating, promoting, funding, and organising

ziyarat al-Arba'in, in order to make it as successful as possible. All the major involvements of *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* in the commemoration of 'Ashura are reported by the Media Directorate of *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* on social media. For example, the Media Directorate (see Figure 33) reported that *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* is in charge of providing security for visitors during *ziyarat al-Arba'in*. It says that *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* forces implemented a plan to secure Karbala by having hundreds of their fighters stationed around the city.

Figure 33 *Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi implementing a plan to secure Karbala during ziyarat al-Arba'in (Source: Twitter)*

Members of *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* are also responsible for organising and directing the traffic during *ziyarat al-Arba'in* (Media Directorate, 2018) (see Figure 34).

Figure 34 *Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi directing the traffic during ziyarat al-Arba'in (Source: Twitter)*

Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi also provide buses to transport visitors and also provide medical centres on route to Karbala (see Figure 35) for treating the visitors to Husayn shrine during *ziyarat al-Arba'in* (Media Directorate, 2018).

Figure 35 *Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi providing medical centres during ziyarat al-Arba'in (Source: Twitter)*

Perhaps nothing more could illustrate what the rituals mean for *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* than the act of the head of this organisation, then Abu-Mahdi Al-Muhandis, at the end of *ziyarat al-Arba'in* in 2018. According to a video clip released on social media by the Media Directorate of *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi*, Al-Muhandis was sweeping the floor of the shrine of Imam Husayn at the end of *ziyarat al-Arba'in* then collected the dust/ dirt from the floor and wiped his head with it for blessing (see Figure 36).

Figure 36 *Al-Muhandis sweeping the floor of the shrine of Imam Husayn after ziyarat al-Arba'in (Source: Twitter)*

The examination of the views expressed by religious leaders on social media shows that Iranian *mujtahids* are also enthusiastic about enforcing *ziyarat al-Arba'in*. The Iranian supreme leader, 'Ali Khamenei, is very active promoting *ziyarat al-Arba'in* on television and through his Twitter account. In a very clear message, Khamenei indicates recently that *ziyarat al-Arba'in* is the strongest means to commemorating 'Ashura. In a tweet dated 13 October, 2019, Khamenei noted:

> The importance of *ziyarat al-Arba'in'* has not changed since its inception. The first ritual of *al-Arba'in*, which established by *ahl al-bayt*, sent a very powerful message against the injustice of Banu Umayyad or Umayyad *Caliphate*. The contemporary rituals of *ziyarat al-Arba'in* have continued to be the most powerful form of 'Ashura rituals challenging the injustice in today's world (see Figure 37).

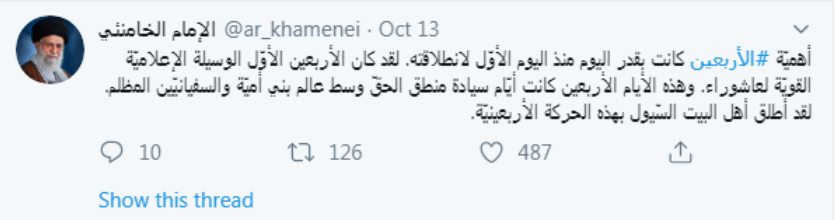


Figure 37 *Khamenei indicates ziyarat al-Arba'in is the strongest form of 'Ashura rituals (Source: Twitter)*

Although the analysis of relevant Twitter feeds shows that whilst many hashtags were used to promote *ziyarat al-Arba'in* including '*ziyarat al-Arba'in'* (#زيارة_الاربعين), 'Arbaeen' (#الاربعينية), and 'Husayn, we are at your service' (#لبيك_ياحسين), I found that 'Husayn unites us' is the dominant hashtag. As noted earlier, senders include hashtags (brief keywords or abbreviations, prefixed with the hash symbol '#') in their messages to mark them as addressing particular themes that make it easier to identify the source of these messages. To promote *ziyarat al-Arba'in*, Khamenei always use 'Husayn unites us' (#الحسين_يجمعنا) in his tweets. In a tweet (see Figure 38) on the occasion of *al-Arba'in* in 2018, Khamenei even emphasises Iran-Iraq unity under the banner of 'Husayn unites us'. In this tweet, the strategic use of *ziyarat al-Arba'in* is evident given that Khamenei implied using *ziyarat al-Arba'in* to unite Iraqis and Iranians because " enemies seek to sowed discord (between Iraq and Iran) but they have failed and their conspiracy will not be effective" (Khamenei, 2018).

Figure 38 *Khamenei emphasises Iran-Iraq unity under the banner of Husayn (Source: Twitter)*

Examining the sources of the 'Husayn unites us' hashtag during *ziyarat al-Arba'in* in 2019 shows that it is mainly used in Iran, and not Iraq. I searched about 800 tweets posted between 2015 and 2019, and found, based on the location users declare on their Twitter accounts and the language used, that about 70% of these tweets were based in Iran.

As I noted during my fieldwork, Karbala in 2016 was overwhelmed with Iraqis and visitors from around the world, especially Iranians, to observe *ziyarat al-Arba'in*. When I was in Karbala, locals that I met informed me that the Iranian government often subsidises air fares to encourage Iranians to observe *ziyarat al-Arba'in.* According to the Iranian embassy in Baghdad, millions of Iranians travel to Iraq annually to visit Karbala for the annual pilgrimage of *ziyarat al-Arba'in* (al-Wasmi, 2019). The Shi'a-dominated Iraqi government was also encouraging Iranians to visit Karbala on *al-Arba'in*. It reduced the visa from ten US dollars to one US dollar, and in 2018, the government exempted Iranians who wanted to observe *ziyarat al-Arba'in* in Karbala from paying visa fees (al-Wasmi, 2019). It was reported that between two to three million Iranians observed the *ziyara* in Karbala in 2019 (Imam Hussein Holy Shrine, 2018). The significance of this official act is that it shows more interest in increasing the numbers of participants in *ziyarat al-Arba'in* than generating income, which in turn qualify them as ritual sponsors. Overall, content analysis supported by my own observations, and illustrated that the rituals enforcers, the *marja'iyya* in Iraq and Iran, have invested heavily to promote *ziyarat al-Arba'in.* According to Imam Hussein Holy Shrine website (2016) "*ziyarat al-Arba'in* has more than doubled in size since 2008, growing to over 20 million people in 2015".

The final agent identified by SRT, ritual entrepreneurs, involves all of those who benefit financially from the commemoration of 'Ashura. I will not, however, address this in this thesis, given that there is a degree of subjectivity involved in speculating about *marja'iyya* benefiting financially from authorising, sponsoring, promoting, and enforcing the mourning rituals of 'Ashura. There is a lack of documentation or any other evidence to support the proposition that the *marja'iyya* is indeed financially benefiting from sponsoring and promoting 'Ashura rituals. This position is supported by my content analysis of relevant websites, financial reports and government related documents. This lack of proof does not mean necessarily the opposite is true. In fact, during my field work in Karbala, I learned that the Holy Shrines receive massive donations

from visitors. Some locals also noted that some Shi‘a religious leaders or their relatives have invested in or are connected to entrepreneurial projects such as hotels that were being developed in Karbala and Najaf. It is reported that with the exponential growth of *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*, the Shi‘a religious establishment has been receiving numerous gifts from around the world, and generous donations from the ever-rising number of pilgrims making them the richest institution in Iraq (Watling, 2016). Similar discussions were also found on social media, claiming that the Shi‘a religious establishment is benefiting financially from the commemoration of ‘Ashura. It should be noted that, due to the lack of transparency, no official financial documents or records are available for the public to review, and thus it is difficult to estimate the gross financial benefit that ‘Ashura rituals generate for Karbala and the other shrine cities. In addition, the Shi‘a religious establishment is not required to declare their incomes and assistance received, therefore, it is difficult to assess the financial benefits, if any, from ‘Ashura rituals. The lack of transparency also makes it difficult to estimate the financial benefits for Diwan Alwagf Alsheai, the Shi‘a financing committee, from the ‘Ashura rituals and all the visitors that come to Karbala and other shrine cities.

In summary, there is evidence in the data to support the argument that the Shi’a religious establishment in Iraq acts as chief legitimator, and sponsor of the mourning rituals of ‘Ashura and an enforcer of *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*. In addition, the Shi’a religious establishment in Iran and *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi*, also qualifying as ritual enforcer, especially given the role of the latter in providing security and assistance to visitors of *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*. After exploring the strength of rituals and their strategic use, the focus of the analysis of stage one now shifts to examine the symbolisms expressed by ‘Ashura rituals.

6.2.3 Symbolic meaning of the rituals

The theoretical framework adopted in this thesis emphasises examining ritual symbolisms. Based on my own observation supported by the examination of materials related to ‘Ashura rituals, especially *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*, available on social media, the symbolic meanings expressed through the mourning rituals of ‘Ashura and *al-Arba‘in* can be categorised into three main themes: the Shi’a are in the right; ‘Ashura rituals intimidate the enemies of the Shi’a, and, they are also an occasion to strengthen ties among Shi’a communities. I discuss each of these here.

6.2.3.1 The Shi‘a are in the right

When re-enacting the battle of Karbala, the rituals, the symbols and narrative of the rituals depict only two sides: ‘Us’, the Shi‘a, versus ‘Them’, the enemy of the Shi‘a. The Shi’a being the followers of uncorrupted principles of Islam whilst the enemies of the Shi’a are portrayed as morally corrupt for their deviation from the principles of Islam as constructed by the Prophet Muhammad. The overall examination of the Shi‘a public discourse during the commemoration of ‘Ashura, including sermons, seminars, posts on social media, articles and TV programs, reveals the denunciation of Yazid, the unjust and corrupt Umayyad Muslim caliph, and the praise for Husayn for his sacrifice in fighting tyranny and corruption. The Shi‘a view of Yazid is articulated by Ayati (2014, p. 37) as follows:

> Yazid was a pleasure-seeking person. He was a man, who kept beasts of prey. He had dogs, monkeys and panthers. He always arranged wine-drinking parties. One day after the martyrdom of Imam Husayn while he was sitting in such a party, Ibn Ziyad was seated on his right side, Yazid turned to the cupbearer and recited two couplets which are translated below:
>
> “Give me a cup of wine which should satiate my bones. Then give another such cup to Ibn Ziyad, the man who is my confidant and who has strengthened my position and the foundation of my *caliphate*”.
>
> Yazid meant to say that Ibn Ziyad by killing Imam Husayn had strengthened the foundation of his *caliphate*.

In a sharp contrast to the way Yazid is viewed, Husayn is regarded by the Shi‘a as the saviour of Islam. Phrases used during the commemoration of ‘Ashura, narrated during sermons, written on banners, or uttered during processions, include: ‘Husayn is a role model for his ultimate sacrifice to revitalise Islam’, and ‘He rose against injustice when everybody else was afraid to take action’. Husayn’s sacrifice to defend Islam against those who tried to destroy it, is described on the official website of ‘Ali al-Sistani, where he explains:

> There is no doubt that the tragedy of Karbala, when ascribed to the killers, is a criminal and terrible act. However, when ascribed to Husain [Husayn]…himself, it represents a conscious confrontation and a courageous resistance for a sacred cause. The whole nation had failed to stand up to Yazid. They had succumbed to his will, and deviation and regression towards the pre-Islamic ways were increasing. Passiveness by Husain [Husayn]… in this situation would have meant the end of Islam as we know it. Thus Husain [Husayn]… took upon himself the responsibility of the whole nation. The greatest tragedy was that one who stood up for the noblest

> of causes, the defense of Islam, was cut down in so cruel a manner. It is for this reason that the sacrifice of Husain [Husayn]… is commemorated annually throughout the Muslim world. Our sorrow never abates as we relive the tragedy. The commemoration of Ashura[‘Ashura] on the 10th of Muharram every year serves to remind us of the sacrifices of the family of the Prophet…. It also makes us aware of the people, then and now, who tried to destroy Islam and the family of the Prophet… and all that they stood for-as well as those who watched, listened and did nothing (al-Sistani, 2018).

Other phrases such as ‘Husayn is the lamp of guidance and the ark of salvation’, and ‘Master of Martyrs’ are also used repeatedly to emphasise Husayn’s sacrifice to defend Islam. In a statement issued by the office of Grand Ayatullah Sayyid Ali al-Sistani during the preparations for the mourning ceremonies of ‘Ashura in 2018, Husayn’s sacrifice was seen as the most excellent and of highest value that the People of the Household (*ahl al-bayt*) had performed:

> That martyrdom was the highest level of the sacrifices made by the Ahl al-Bayt [*ahl al-bayt*] in the path of Allah, to raise the name of Allah and the rule of rationality, wisdom, justice, goodness; the values that have been the cause of all messengers of Allah (al-Sistani, 2018).

The Iraqi populist religious and political leader, Muqtada al-Sadr describes Husayn as someone who wore rough clothes and never submitted to desires and pleasures (al-Sadar, 2018). In addition, and in the same context of public discourse, Husayn represents peace, freedom, dignity and bravery. There is also a great emphasis on Husayn’s revolution, which is seen as toppling a corrupt and skewed Muslim regime. Many individuals on social media, for example, have posted phrases such as ‘Husayn’s revolution is against tyranny’, ‘Husayn’s uprising is against corruption’, and ‘Husayn’s revolution is for the oppressed’. This view is exemplified in the following tweet (Figure 39):

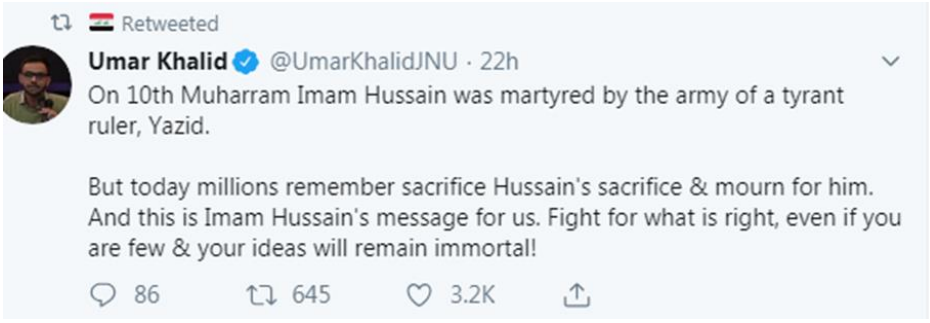


Figure 39 *Imam Husayn message; fight for what is right (Source: Twitter)*

The *Them* and *Us* narrative is also shown in a tweet by the religious leader Sayyid Qazwini in which he uses *ziyarat al-Arba'in* with the hashtag "#ArbaeenWalk" (see Figure 40) to place the Shi'a on the side of peace whilst those who killed Husayn on the terrorist side:

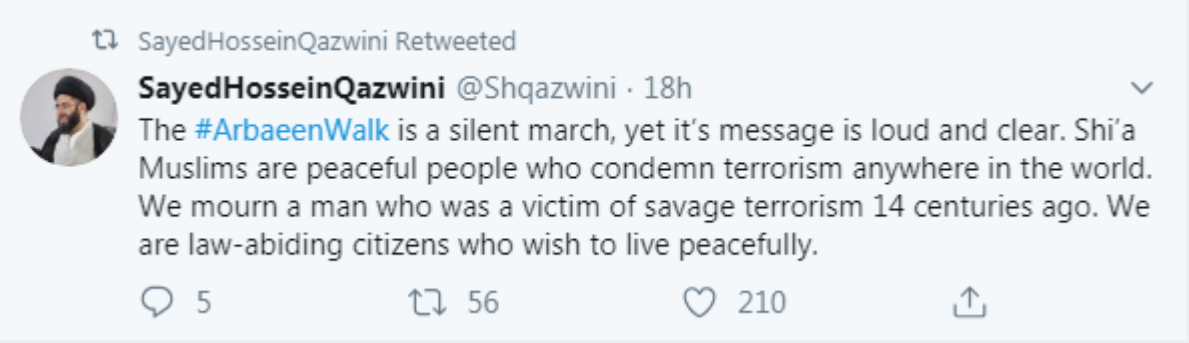


Figure 40 *the Shi'a on the side of peace (Source: Twitter)*

When examining many Friday sermons of al-Sistani and al-Sadr, especially during each of the two month mourning periods between 2015 and 2019, many references could be seen linking the threat that Iraq and *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* were facing regarding ISIS and the threat that Husayn was confronting in the person of Yazid. In a sermon dated only four days before *ziyarat al-Arba'in* in 2015, the spokesperson of al-Sistani, urged members of *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* not to leave their positions and not to go to Karbala to observe *ziyarat al-Arba'in*, stressing that the rewards for staying to fight would be much bigger than observing the *ziyara* because they would be fighting for Imam Husayn (Imam Hussein Holy Shrine, 2015). Content analysis shows that *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* symbolically placed itself in Husayn's camp as it relied heavily on the narrative of Karbala; one of their main slogans is 'every day is 'Ashura and every land is Karbala' (the Media Directorate of Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi, 2017). On many occasions, *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* is referred to as *al-Hashd al-Husayni* or the army of Husayn (the Media Directorate of Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi, 2018)

The themes that emerged from the content analysis are in line with the themes that emerged from my fieldwork in Karbala in 2016 in that the mourning rituals present two sides; the unjust, corrupt terrorists of Yazid's camp versus the just, moral and peaceful members of Husayn's camp. When

I was in Karbala during *ziyarat al-Arba'in* the *Them* and *Us* narrative was evident when people I met discussed current events, placing ISIS within the Yazid camp. Not only the sermons but even when people I stayed with in Karbala socialised around food, for example, they would describe the ISIS threat, their hatred of the Shi'a and the groups' plans to destroy the holy shrines of Imams, the same way Yazid's army is described (field notes, Karbala, 29 November, 2016). Many of them agreed that if ISIS was to succeed, they would take 'our women' as *sabaya*, women captives, in a direct comparison to Zainab, Husayn's sister, who was taken captive with the other women in Husayn's camp (field notes, Karbala, 20 November, 2016). It was common for people that I met in Karbala to describe members of ISIS who engaged in suicide missions as people with evil looks and bloodthirsty determination, and to compare them with Shrim, Husayn's killer. Overall, by commemorating 'Ashura, the Shi'a assert their position with Husayn's side and place their enemies on the other side, in the Yazid camp.

6.2.3.2 Intimidate the enemies of the Shi'a

Symbolically, the mourning environment created during the commemoration, especially the processions of *ziyarat al-Arba'in*, including the *mashaya*, is intended to intimidate the enemies of the Shi'a. An influential Iraqi religious leader starts the mourning rituals, on the first *majlis* on the first day of Muharram by attacking those who have been trying to denigrate the mourning rituals of 'Ashura because they are intimidated by the unity created from the commemoration. In an angry tone, Sayyid 'Ali Al-Talqani noted in his sermon: "we all gathered here because the mourning of Husayn unite us. This unity scares our enemy and it is also the secret of our resilience. We will also be targeted because of this unity" (Sayyid 'Ali Al-Talqani, 2019).

The overwhelming waves of Shi'a wearing black gathered in memorial services, loudly uttering '*Lebayk Ya Husayn'* (Husayn, we are at your service) or at the flag changing ceremony symbolise intimidation. A sample of this view is reflected in tweet of an individual noting that "the chants of '*Lebayk Ya Husayn'* is what terrifies the enemies of the Shi'as, we are united by the love of Aba Abdillah [Imam Husayn]" (see Figure 41).

Figure 41 *Changing flag ceremony terrifies the enemies of the Shi'a (Source: Twitter)*

Based on the examination of the views of religious leaders expressed on social media, during TV interviews, or in memorial services, it is mourning processions, especially the extensive numbers of Shi'a observing *ziyarat al-Arba'in*, that work to challenge the enemies of the Shi'a. *Mujtahids* who are active on Twitter, such as Modarresi underscores this point (Figure 42) noting that the message of *ziyarat al-Arba'in* is that the Shi'a will never forget, nor never abandon Husayn, even if they get killed by their enemies (Modarresi, 2018).

Figure 42 *Sayyid Modarresi; we will never forget Husayn (Source: Twitter)*

Similarly, Sayyid Hossein Qazwini, a religious leader, recently emphasised the sheer numbers of participants in *ziyarat al-Arba'in*, invariably increasing, and noted that, in 2019, new world records will be set (see Figure 43):

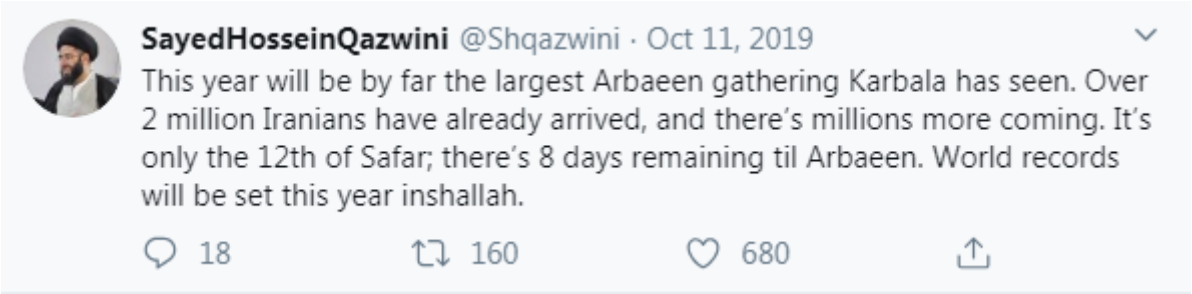


Figure 43 *Sayyid Hossein Qazwini emphasising numbers of participants in ziyarat al-Arba'in (Source: Twitter)*

Furthermore, my examination of materials on social media related to intimidation shows that ISIS is the identified enemy. In addition to religious leaders, *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* has used in recent years the commemoration of 'Ashura to intimidate ISIS. For example, the revenge slogan, '*Ya la-Tharat al-Husayn*' (Oh, the avengers of Husayn), as created by the *tawwabun* after the killing of Husayn, is widely used by members of *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi*, and seen on flags they carry (the Media Directorate of Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi, 2018). Most of their military operations' names usually carry a sectarian overtone. As shown in Figure 44, *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* launched last year an operation called 'Ashura to make sure no terrorist groups function in the area around the Lake Hamrin in Diyala province (the Media Directorate of Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi, 2019).

Figure 44 *The media war team of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi announced that al-Hashd al-Sha'bi launches an operation called 'Ashura (Source: Twitter)*

There is also a brigade within the *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* that is named after 'Ashura: *saraya* 'Ashura (Media Directorate of Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi, 2018). In addition, members of *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* are very much involved in the commemoration of 'Ashura. They organise and participate in mourning processions carrying 'Ashura flags, especially red ones, symbolising revenge and displaying *Husseinite* imagery. According to the Media Directorate of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi, members of *Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* participated in a mourning procession to observe *ziyarat al-Arba'in* in 2018 reaffirming during the ritual their position as the guardian of the nation (see Figure 45).

Figure 45 *Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* participated in a mourning procession to observe *ziyarat al-Arba'in (Source: Twitter)*

Regarding my own observation, I witnessed many mourning processions of *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* in Karbala, in 2016. Some of those who took part in these processions wore military uniforms. In addition, during my fieldwork in Iraq, I noticed that street billboards showing images aligning the *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* alongside Husayn's camp were very visible in Karbala, in Bagdad, and on the road between the two cities. One such street billboard (see Figure 46) depicted a member of *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* standing side by side with Husayn, facing the armies of Yazid in 680 and ISIS in the present day (their flag can be seen in the background). In fact, the writing at the bottom left corner of the billboard names *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* as *al-Hashd al-Husayni*, the army of Husayn.

Figure 46 *Street billboards showing images aligning the al-Hashd al-Sha'bi alongside Husayn's camp*

My examination shows that whilst it is common for religious leaders to explicitly direct their messages of intimidation to ISIS, it is uncommon for them to name their other enemies. In that regard, Sayyid Hossein Qazwini was an exception when in a tweet issued in October 2019 (see Figure 47), he explicitly named the Saudi (Saudi Arabia) as the enemy of the Shi'a, arguing that the Shi'a unity created by *ziyarat al-Arba'in* upsets and angers the enemies of the Shi'a, the Saudis:

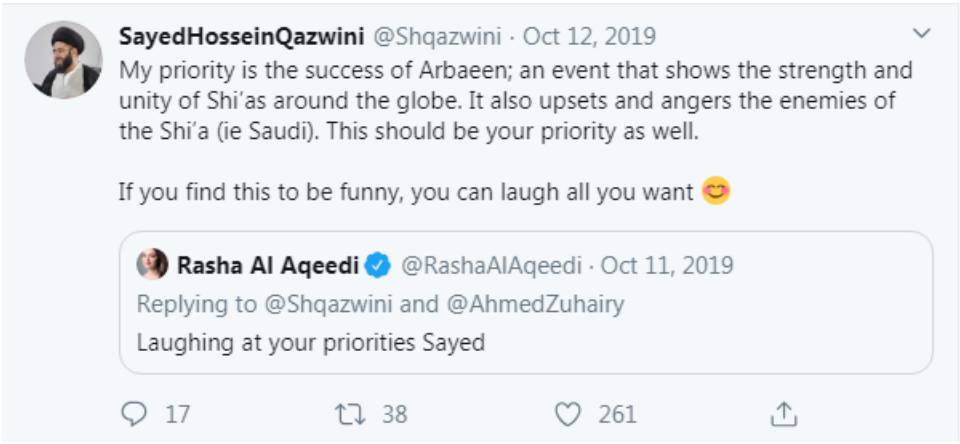


Figure 47 *Sayyid Hossein Qazwini named Saudi Arabia as the enemy of the Shi'a (Source: Twitter)*

Furthermore, the absence of any other cultural practices that could be described as celebrations during the two month mourning period can also be seen as form of intimidation. Shi'a religious

leaders, whether in sermons, TV interviews or on social media, stress that Muslims are obliged to mourn the killing of Husayn. The popular Iraqi Shi‘a cleric and politician, Muqtada al-Sadr, used strong language warning Shi‘as and Sunnis not to engage in any celebrations on the day of ‘Ashura, describing those who celebrate joyous events on the day of ‘Ashura as the followers of Yazid. In a tweet (see Figure 48), al-Sadr notes, “All Shi‘a and Sunni moderates must disown Yazid and his followers, the killers of the Prophet’ grandsons [Husayn and other Imams] who rejoice and celebrate on the day of ‘Ashura. May God curse the killers of Imam Husayn”.

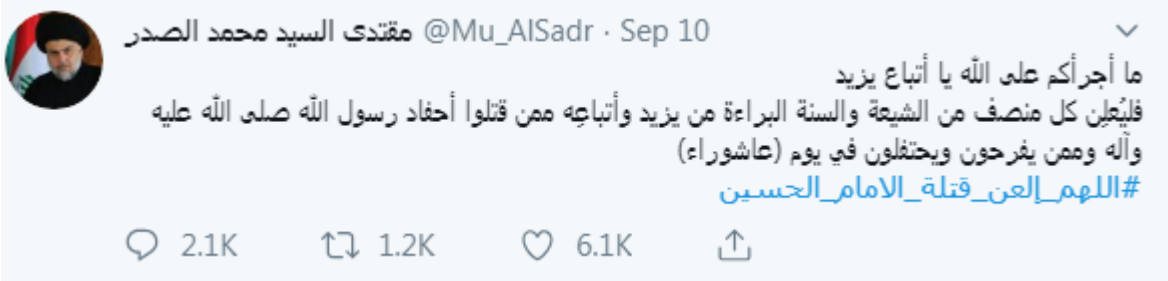


Figure 48 *Muqtada al-Sadr, warning Shi‘as and Sunnis not to celebrate on ‘Ashura (Source: Twitter)*

I found many posts on social media that reflect individuals’ reactions to this form of intimidation and their dissatisfaction with not being able to celebrate their birthdays, for example, because it coincides with of the commemoration of ‘Ashura. In a tweet (see Figure 49), an individual noted that “with sadness, for the third consecutive year, my birthday coincides with Muharram”.

Figure 49 *An individual commenting on not celebrating birthdays during Muharram (Source: Twitter)*

Another person expressed similar views on Twitter for not being able to celebrate her birthday (see Figure 50). There is a common understanding among the majority of the Shi‘a that they need to alter their social agenda during the commemoration. For the majority of the Shi‘a, mourning the death of Husayn is more important than any other event, and this contributes to the intimidating use of the ‘Ashura rituals.

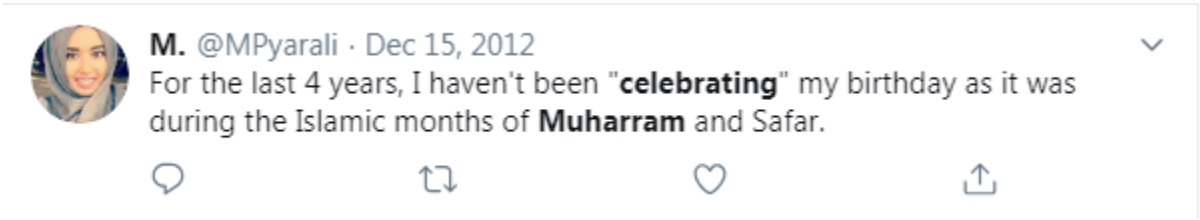


Figure 50 *Another individual commenting on not celebrating birthdays during Muharram (Source: Twitter)*

My own observation of ‘Ashura rituals in Baghdad and Karbala confirms that it is not only the Shi‘a, but also the majority of the Sunni and other sects residing in both Baghdad and other Shi‘a dominated cities and communities that seem to abstain from engaging in any form of celebration, at least publicly, during the two month mourning period. However, examination of relevant materials on social media shows that some individuals vent their frustration online, dreading the mourning environment created during the commemoration of ‘Ashura. The following tweet (see Figure 51) exemplifies the frustration for not being able to celebrate during the mourning period of Muharram and Safar calling it a Shi’a problem.

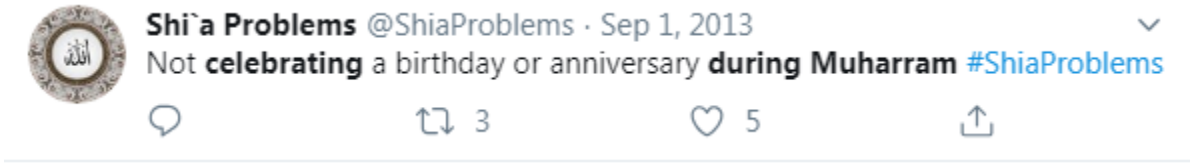


Figure 51 *View expressed against no celebrations during Muharram (Source: Twitter)*

6.2.3.3 Strengthening ties among Shi'a communities

Family and community gathering appeared as a theme from the analysis of my fieldnotes from Karbala in 2016. It seems that *ziyarat al-Arba'in* is not only about observing mourning and the ritualised practices of weeping, *latum*, and processions; it also has a social dimension. The analysis shows that *ziyarat al-Arba'in* creates a convenient environment that not only satisfies religious and spiritual needs, but also social needs. Despite the grim reality of some of the ritualised practices of *ziyarat al-Arabian*, I noticed that it is a comforting time for the Shi'a, a holiday during which they can escape the chaos and instability they experience during the rest of the year (observation, 16-21 November, 2016). This was confirmed by many participants that I met in Karbala where they mentioned that "we come to Karbala for *ziyara* and *tesyara* (socialising)" (field notes, 18 November, 2016). When families, friends, neighbours meet in Karbala, they chat about different issues, and discuss politics, sports, and even movies. They socialise in their backyards, or they simply sit on the pavements where many neighbours, friends, and community members gather (fieldnotes, 18 November, 2016). In addition, whilst socialising, many discussed the lack of security in Iraq, and many young men complained that they cannot find work. One individual in his twenties, who was staying in the same house with me in Karbala, mentioned that "there is no work for us, absolutely no work, you get a job only if you are well connected to political parties" (fieldnotes, 18 November, 2016).

In addition, many complained about the government, the general perception being that it is corrupt and dysfunctional. Based on my interaction with locals and visitors, I noticed that the level of frustration with the government was undeniable. It was unexpected to hear from a young Shi'a person in his twenties publicly admitting that "Saddam was better than them [the government] but Saddam's problem was that he did not allow the Shi'a to do this [the freedom to observe *ziyara*]" (fieldnotes, 19 November, 2016). Many people whilst socialising and reflecting on current affairs however, praised the *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* for its role in fighting ISIS. Overall, based on my observation of *ziyarat al-Arba'in*, this event was more about eating together, socialising, and discussing politics than it was about practicing mourning rituals. After presenting the analysis of the symbolic meanings of 'Ashura rituals, the following sections will discuss the social outcomes of observing the rituals.

6.2.4 Social outcomes

There are three main noticeable outcomes resulting from the rituals of ‘Ashura: the mourning rituals are seen as un-Islamic practices, the rituals create division between Shi‘a and Sunni Iraqis, and the exertion of Shi‘a power.

6.2.4.1 The mourning rituals are seen as ‘Un-Islamic’ practices

The theme of the mourning rituals as un-Islamic developed from the content analysis where I noted phrases used to describe the ‘Ashura rituals such as ‘un-Islamic’, ‘invented’, ‘*fitna*’ (dissension), ‘ignorance’, and ‘humiliating acts’. The analysis also shows the people who practice them, the Shi‘a, being described as ‘ignorant’, ‘aiming at destroying Islam’, ‘worshipers of graves’, and ‘sectarian’. The underlying concept behind this view of the rituals as ‘un-Islamic’ is that they were not mentioned in the Quran nor practiced during the time of the Prophet Muhammad. Here is a sample of an individual tweet (see Figure 52) to highlight the view that ‘Ashura rituals deviate from the true Islam:

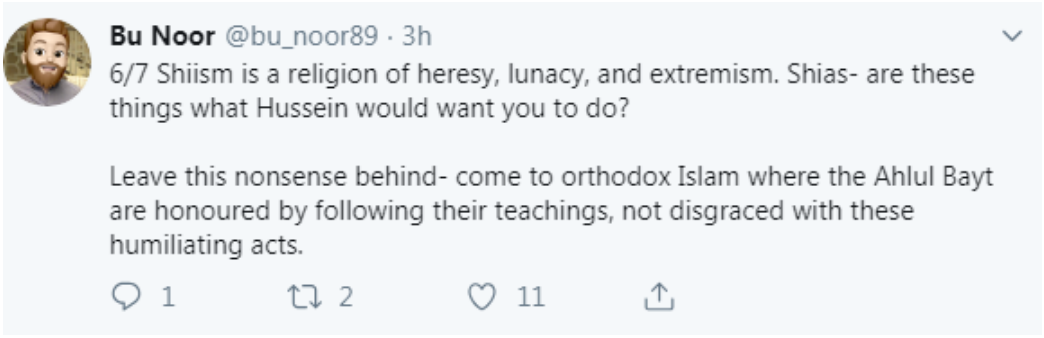


Figure 52 *the way Shi‘a commemorate ‘Ashura is not what Imam Husayn wants from them (Source: Twitter)*

In addition to social media, a similar theme of ‘un-Islamic’ practices is also found in sermons, articles, and TV interviews. Related to the ‘un-Islamic’ theme, are common questions and comments, such as: ‘How can the Shi‘a trust the Karbala story’, ‘was not Husayn wrong to revolt against the ruler of his time’, ‘do not the Shi‘as exaggerate how bad Yazid was’, ‘were not the Shi‘a responsible for killing Husayn’, ‘why do the Shi‘as cry so much in Muharram’, ‘is not ‘Ashura a day of fasting, not mourning’, ‘why do the Shi‘a wear black in Muharram*’* (Dewji and Alidina, 2012, p.129-148). Furthermore, ‘Ashura rituals are described as foreign to Islam to make them a source of mockery and disgust. Many individuals post comments about the way some of

the ‘Ashura rituals are conducted. For example, one individual expressed his disgust by calling those who practice massaging the feet of *mashaya* or walkers during *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* as people with no dignity and idiotic. This individual notes:

> Good morning/ evening!
> Dear Shi’a, I want to understand if you are stupid, have no dignity, or with no manner. Why would someone belittle himself this way washing the feet of an Iranian man [walked to the shrine of Husayn for *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*] for blessing…Reclaim your dignity. Shame of you (see Figure 53).

Figure 53 *An individual criticising foot massage practices observed* during *ziyarat al-Arba‘in (Source: Twitter)*

Another individual expresses his disapproval of some of the ritualised practices commemorating the killing of Imam Husayn by noting that:

When I see these disgusting nonsensical practices [in reference to people covering themselves in mud allegedly from the area where Husayn was killed], I only repeat what Omar's [one of the four right-guided *caliphs*] pray may Allah keep a Mountain of fire between us and Iran [in reference to the fact that these practices were originally transmitted from Iran] (see Figure 54).

Figure 54 *An individual criticising some of the mourning practices-mud covering (Source: Twitter)*

Another individual (see Figure 55) reflects the views that the mourning rituals are seen as 'un-Islamic' practices, describing the mourning rituals as pagan rituals which the religion of Islam came to abolish.

Figure 55 *An individual describes 'Ashura rituals as pagan rituals (Source: Twitter)*

In summary, some individuals believe the mourning ritualised practices contradict Islamic teachings and raise questions about their legitimacy. In addition, 'Ashura rituals provide occasion for friction on religious grounds, particularly referring to the debated faithfulness of the 'Ashura rituals to the true Islamic faith, which is discussed in the following section.

6.2.4.2 'Ashura rituals create division between Shi'a and Sunni Iraqis

The examination of materials related to 'Ashura rituals show that the commemoration raises sensitivities and, occasionally results in increasing tension between Shi'a and Sunni Iraqis. To begin with, according to the narrative used in *Ziyarat* 'Ashura, a supplication that is recited by the Shi'a on the on 'Ashura day, Muslims are categorised in three groups: *ummah* that mourn the killing of Husayn, *ummah* that killed Husayn, and *ummah* that learned about the killing of Husayn but decided not to act i.e. ignore the tragedy (Hussain, 2010). Within this clear division articulated in *Ziyarat* 'Ashura, the first *ummah* ask Allah (God) to curse the second and the third *ummah*

(Hussain, 2010). Almost at the beginning of the two-month mourning period, heated discussions re-emerge between Shi'a and Sunni Iraqis. The analysis of data shows that the Shi'a and Sunni use social media in Arabic and English to express their views, which is mostly manifest in the form of attack and counter attack. Most Shi'a Iraqis reflect on the spirituality of walking to Karbala, the sense of unity among those who visit Karbala for *ziyarat al-Arba'in* and the generosity of Iraqis cooking and serving food for the visitors of Husayn or in *mawakib al-khidmah*, the processions of service. The Shi'a coverage of 'Ashura rituals also generates antagonism between the supporters of the rituals and those who oppose them over issues concerning mourning versus fasting on 'Ashura day and also between those who are in favour or against Iranian influence in Iraq. Even within the Shi'a themselves, there are sporadic division lines between the educated and the less educated, the secular and the religious. Referring to the first polemic on the predominant nature of the 'Ashura rituals, the Shi'a religious leader Sayyid Qazwini, in 2018, challenged on social media those who objected to mourning rituals on 'Ashura but favoured fasting practices on the same day (see Figure 56).

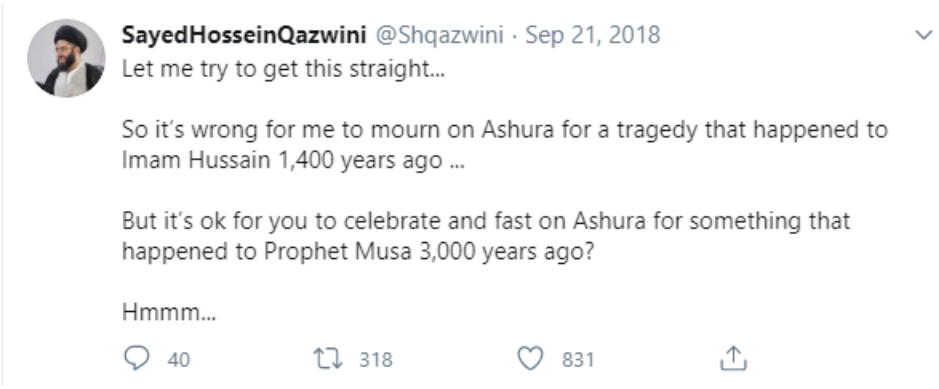


Figure 56 *Sayyid Hossein Qazwini arguing for commemorating 'Ashura (Source: Twitter)*

The previous argument is disputed by many individuals who see the mourning rituals in general and *ziyarat al-Arba'in* in particular as a *fitna*, a plot to divide Muslims. In response, participants comment that attacking the commemoration of 'Ashura is not new. The media agency of one of the main Brigades of *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi, wikalat ahlu' haq,* posted a message on their website noting that:

This immoral attack on ‘Ashura rituals and the attempt to create doubt about their legitimacy is nothing in comparison to what al-Mua’tasim, an Abbasid caliph who fined the visitors of Husayn and ordered to cut off their hands and the shrine of Husayn to be demolished and flooded it. However, these acts have motivated the Shi’a to increase their love for Husayn (see Figure 57).

Figure 57 *A message from the media agency of one of the Brigades of al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi (Source: Twitter)*

Other source of criticism of ‘Ashura rituals emerges from those individuals who believe that the commemoration of ‘Ashura, especially the mourning processions, provide an opportunity for the Shi‘a to insult historical Sunni figures. A person tweeted that:

> There are no differences between someone who utter a slogan such as Abu Baker and Omar [the first and second right-guided *caliphs*, respected by the Sunnis] are infidels and a terrorist because both cannot tolerate the belief of others. These slogans symbolise hate and threat to half of Iraqi society as well as millions of

Muslims worldwide. Therefore, someone who utter such a slogan must be arrested (see Figure 58).

Figure 58 *An individual expressing his disproval of insulting Sunni historical figures (Source: Twitter, 2019)*

On the anniversary of commemorating ‘Ashura in 2018, a well-read Arabic newspaper al-Qudis al-Arabi, in an article entitled ‘a tragedy for Husayn or it is a tragedy for Muslims’, questioned the rationale of this commemoration arguing the rituals call for revenge against other Muslims and they have been used strategically for political gains (Jemieh, 2018). The article argues that the rituals create division between Muslims and evoke sectarian tension (Jemieh, 2018).

The tension here described also manifests itself in physical attacks on Shi‘a commemorating ‘Ashura as they become easy target for terrorist groups whilst gathering for outdoor cooking or in processions. It has been reported that on March 2, 2004, Zarqawi's group, affiliated with al-Qaeda, a fundamentalist Sunni militant group, staged a series of bomb attacks on Shi’a commemorating ‘Ashura, killing at least 185 people (Hunt, 2005). The examination of relevant online materials including newspapers shows that there was a surge in attacks on Shi’a commemorating ‘Ashura, especially the *mashaya*, those who travel to Karbala on foot to observe *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* in Karbala, during the civil war period (2006-2007) in Iraq. According to the Iraqi authorities, the latest in a series of attacks, more than 60 Shi’a pilgrims died just steps from the Imam Husayn shrine in Karbala in 2016, when a terrorist detonated an explosive vest (Oppel Jr., 2006). A report by High Commissioners on Refugees on International Religious Freedom in Iraq listed many attacks on the Shi’a during the commemoration of ‘Ashura (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2007).

The examination of on-line materials indicated that even after 2007, attacks, especially by snipers and suicide trucks, continued to target the Shi‘a, especially during the two month mourning period. The Associated Press in 2010 reported that a female suicide bomber detonated her explosives inside a way station for Shi‘a pilgrims during ‘Ashura, killing 54 people (Murphy, 2010). The report also indicated that the attack was the third major strike by suspected Sunni insurgents in a week and left Baghdad’s top security official acknowledging that extremists are adopting new methods to outwit bomb-detection squads (Murphy, 2010). According to Major General Qassim al-Moussawi, Baghdad’s top military spokesman, that female bomber hid the explosives beneath her *abaya* (a woman’s black cloak worn from head to toe) as she joined the *mashaya* (pilgrims) on the outskirts of Baghdad’s Shi‘a-dominated neighbourhood of al-Sha’ab (Murphy, 2010).

In 2012, a car bomb targeted mourning processions exploded in the nearby shrine city of Karbala, killing at least five people and wounded many others (BBC News, 2012). In 2013, a suicide bomber blew himself up during the commemoration of ‘Ashura in the eastern Iraqi city of al-Sadiya, killing at least 35 people and wounding 75, a senior Iraqi official and security sources said (News wires, 2013). In the same report, it is noted that the Shi‘a are “considered apostates by hard-line Sunni Islamist insurgents who have been regaining momentum in Iraq this year” (News wires,

2013). Another attack also reported during ‘Ashura rituals in 2013 were 19 people were killed in bomb attacks targeting Iraqi police and Shi‘a pilgrims during *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* (BBC News, 2013).

In fact, when the threat from ISIS was real in 2014-2017, the attack on the Shi‘a during the commemoration of ‘Ashura, especially in Baghdad, became the new norm. According to a news report published by the Guardian (2014):

> This year things are different for many of the Shia [Shi‘a] faithful. With a relentless insurgency blazing throughout Iraq, killing an ever-increasing number of mainly Shi‘a Iraqis, ‘Ashura has transcended its ancient origins to become a here-and-now fight for existence (Chulov, 2014).

The report went on to indicate that “Sunni jihadists, who view the Shias [Shi‘as] as heretics, have again vowed to wreak havoc wherever they can. And throughout Muharram, they have been targeting civilians with familiar deadly effect” (Chulov, 2104). In fact, given the severity and consistency of attacking those who commemorate ‘Ashura, especially in Baghdad, a reporter commented on social media in 2014 that it was lucky that Shi’a community members had not been attacked whilst cooking outdoors during the commemoration of ‘Ashura (see Figure 59).

Figure 59 *A typical scene of cooking outdoors during the mourning period (Source: Twitter)*

In the same period between 2014 and 2017, especially during *ziyarat al-Arba'in*, suicide bombers staged attacks on processions or shot walkers on their way to Karbala. Arango (2016) reported that at least 80 people, many of them Shi'a pilgrims on their way home to Iran, after observing ziyarat al-Arba'in in Karbala, were killed when an Islamic State suicide bomber detonated a truck filled with explosives at a roadside service station in southern Iraq in 2016.

Whilst there were numerous incidents and terrorist attacks before the defeat of ISIS in 2017, the threat of physical attacks was still imminent even after its defeat. In 2019, Iraq's Counter-Terrorism units and forces of *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* said that it had foiled a suspected Islamic State attack on Shi'a pilgrims south of Baghdad. "A terrorist cell belonging to the ISIS terrorist organisation was planning to target the visitors of the upcoming *ziyarat al-Arba'in*" (Kurdistan 24, 2019).

Another theme that emerged from observation is that the 'Ashura rituals are not seen as a national event, given that the Sunnis do not take part in the commemoration. I attempted to clarify, from some of the Shi'a that I encountered during my fieldwork, whether the Sunni are welcomed in the commemoration of 'Ashura. Many have mentioned that there is nothing to prevent them from commemorating 'Ashura and visiting the Shrine of Imam Husayn but they do not come to Karbala (fieldnotes, Karbala, November, 2016). However, my examination of materials on social media, especially sources associated with *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi*, shows images and discussion about Sunni provinces and cities taking part in the commemoration, including Mosul, Ramadi, and Fallujah that were liberated from ISIS by *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi*. The media team of *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi*, see Figure 60, noted that "for the first time after its liberation, the people of Mosul participate in *ziyarat al-Arba'in* carrying the flags of *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* heading towards Karbala" (media team, al-Hashd al-Sha'bi, 2018).

Figure 60 *People of Mosul participate in ziyarat al-Arba'in (Source: Twitter)*

The analysis of data also shows that these rituals are regarded as controversial for some, whilst for others they are consistent with the norms of mourning rituals and the holiness of the occasion of 'Ashura commemoration. It emerged that some of the mourning rituals are practiced almost everywhere: in government offices, hospitals, universities, and schools. I learned that during the commemoration of 'Ashura, very little work can be done in Baghdad. Most businesses close for a number of days except those that cater to the rituals' participants. I was also informed by locals that memorial services to commemorate 'Ashura are held in government buildings, and it is also common to bring and distribute food during official working hours. Many employees do not go to work because of road closures. It seems that nothing is certain and people's perception is that nothing can be accomplished during the two-month mourning period (fieldnotes, Karbala, November, 2016). This outcome of commemorating 'Ashura, where nothing can be accomplished, along with other social outcomes are further explored in the second and third stage of data analysis presented in the following chapter.

6.2.4.3 Shi‘a Power

The commemoration of ‘Ashura empowers the Shi‘a Iraqis in general, and the Shi‘a religious establishment in particular. The power that emerges from observing ‘Ashura rituals is acknowledged by the Imam Husayn Holy Shrine and discussed on its website (2018) within the context of despotic regimes:

> All despotic regimes have felt threatened by these *majlises* [*majalis*]. Throughout the centuries they have tried to prevent them. At one time even the site of Imam Hussain's [Husayn] grave at Karbala was ploughed up. They feared the grief and lamentation for Imam Hussain [Husayn] because in that grief and lamentation people remembered the goodness, the justice, the kindness, the gentleness, and the bravery of the martyred Imam. These were not qualities that tyrannical governments wished people to think about, their concern was bribery, corruption, nepotism, and naked force. They saw the threat to their world, to their values, to their position. Seeing it, they sought to suppress the memory of Imam Hussain [Husayn]. However, such was the power, the influence, the glory of that memory, that they could not remove it from the hearts of men, from the Shi’a of all the Imams, the Shi`a of Imam Hussain [Husayn]. The triumph of the martyred Imam is such that every year on Ashura [‘Ashura], in places all over the world, the faithful gather together to remember the Imam (Howard, 2018).

Another dimension of such power, emerging from content analysis, was the perception that the mourning processions of ‘Ashura had contributed to the victory over ISIS. This was acknowledged by many religious leaders, politicians and militia leaders. For the first time in modern Iraqi history, the President of Iraq, the Sunni Kurd Barham Salih, recognised in a televised speech on the occasion of the martyrdom of Husayn in (2018), the importance commemorating the tragedy of Karbala in defeating the threat of terrorism, encouraging people to learn from Husayn’s principles (Salih, 2018). The examination of materials posted on some Iraqi politicians’ social media shows that many prominent politicians and high-ranking military personnel have also publicly participated in the rituals and have been empowered by capitalising on the notion that they follow Imam Husayn principles. The former Iraqi Prime Minister Nori al-Maliki, for instance, participated in *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* in 2016, and noted that it has crucial role in mobilising the masses to defend the noble principles that Imam Husayn stood for and revolted to protect (see Figure 61).

Figure 61 *Former Prime Minister Nori al-Maliki in 2016 participating in ziyarat al-Arba'in (Source: Twitter)*

Similarly, the media agency of *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* noted in 2019 that on the occasion of *ziyarat al-Arba'in*, the Iraqi Prime Minister received a phone call from the Iranian vice president, Eshaq Jahangiri, thanking him for organising and sponsoring *ziyarat al-Arba'in* which has become an impressive show of Muslim power (the Media Directorate of *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi*, 2019). On a related note, an individual on social media argued that "commemorating 'Ashura rituals and observing mourning processions have produced heroes who were able to defeat ISIS. For those who criticise the rituals, what have they contributed when ISIS threat was imminent except criticising those who volunteered to fight ISIS?" (see Figure 62).

Figure 62 *A view expressed on Twitter contributing the defeat of ISIS to 'Ashura rituals (Source: Twitter)*

The Media Directorate of *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* has also produced numerous images on social media linking the victory over ISIS to the commemoration of 'Ashura. In one image dated September 2019 (see figure 63), a member of *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* is carrying a black 'Ashura flag, to signify mourning, decorated with the image of Sistani and the slogan 'we won because of your *fatwa*'. It is also noted that "we will not be defeated; we will not abandon Husayn" (see Figure 63).

Figure 63 *A member of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi is carrying a black 'Ashura flag (Source: Twitter)*

In another image, *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* media committee noted that " 'Ashura …is our secret to victory" (see Figure 64).

Figure 64 *'Ashura …is our secret to victory (Source media team, al-Hashd al-Sha'bi, 2018)*

Finally, in 2018, a video clip released by the Media Directorate of al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi, aimed at those who dismiss the significance of ‘Ashura rituals, it was argued that the rituals in fact supported the massive victory against ISIS. The video clip started with praising the *marja‘iyya* for saving the country by issuing the *fatwa* to create *al-Hashd al-Shaabi*. The narrator goes on to say that remembering the sacrifice of Imam Husayn motivated members of *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi* in their battle against terrorism. He added that, without prior training, they excelled in organising themselves, and in supporting and communicating with each other, all because they grew up volunteering and participating in the processions of *al-Arba‘in*. The video clip goes on to praise them, noting that they know how to get supplies, they knew to move around, and most importantly, they were really good at teamwork. Overall, the underlying message from the Media Directorate of al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi is that the *Fatwa* would have been impossible to materialise successfully without the annual commemoration of ‘Ashura where the Shi‘a are emotionally charged and reminded that they have been victimised.

Furthermore, the enormous numbers of participants in processions, especially the *mashaya* during *ziyarat al-Arba‘in,* is seen as a victory for the Shi’a because the idea behind killing Husayn is to end Shi‘ism. One of the main repeated slogans uttered during the commemoration of ‘Ashura is a saying attributed to Husayn’s sister, Zainab, whilst in captivity facing Yazid: “*Wallahi ln temhoo thiekerunae*” (By God [Allah], you will never eliminate us, *ahl al-bayt*) (fieldnotes, Karbala, November, 2016).

It is also worth noting that within the context of the empowerment of the Shi’a due to the commemoration of ‘Ashura, and especially the rituals of *ziyarat al-Arba‘in,* Karbala has been gaining considerable prominence in comparison to other Iraqi provinces. In turn, this contributes to the empowerment of the Shi‘a, given that it is one of the main bases for the Shi‘a religious establishment. Overall, based on views of religious leaders, politicians, *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi*, and individuals, ‘Ashura rituals contribute to the empowerment of the Shi‘a.

6.3 Chapter Summary

This chapter started with outlining the progress of contemporary ‘Ashura rituals that was based on the examination of materials mostly available on religious websites including that of the Imam Hussein Holy Shrine. Exploration of contemporary ‘Ashura rituals also benefited from my fieldwork in Karbala. This was an important first step because it put the ritualised practices of ‘Ashura into perspective. The discussion in this chapter moved on to present the analysis of data collected, which was also based on content analysis and fieldwork conducted in Iraq, in four categories: the strength of ‘Ashura rituals, their strategic use, the symbolic meanings of the rituals, and the social outcomes of the commemoration of ‘Ashura. The analysis shows that ritualised practices of *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* are the most visible and have been used strategically by the Shi‘a religious establishment in Iraq and Iran. Symbolically, the rituals boost the morale of the Shi‘a and intimidate their enemies. In addition, the commemoration of ‘Ashura is the time when Shi’a communities strengthen their ties and reinforce their unity. The first stage of data analysis shows that the social outcomes of commemorating ‘Ashura are threefold: the rituals empower the Shi‘a, ‘Ashura rituals are perceived as ‘un-Islamic’ practices, and create division between the Shi‘as and the Sunnis.

As discussed in the previous chapter, given the elements of trustworthiness and triangulation, this thesis does not rely only on the researcher’s views and interpretations. Questions need to be asked of both Shi‘a and Sunni Iraqis to seek their views on the impact of ‘Ashura rituals on their relations. In the next chapter, findings of the second and third stages of data analysis, which are based on interviews and a survey are presented.

7 Findings of Stage Two and Three: Interviews and a survey

The qualitative methodology used for this inquiry, as described in Chapter Five, is comprised of three stages of data collection. Whilst the previous chapter presented the findings of the first stage of data analysis, this chapter presents the analysis of the second stage, which is based on interviews and a survey conducted with Shi'a and Sunni Iraqis, and the third stage, which is based on interviews conducted with key informants. The discussion in this chapter starts with presenting the findings of the second stage, and then moves on to present the findings of the third stage. This chapter concludes by presenting the final findings.

7.1 Second Stage: Themes Emerging from Interviews and Survey

The aim of this stage of data collection and analysis was to obtain the views of Shi'a and Sunni Iraqi participants residing either in Iraq or in the UK on the themes that emerged from my field work and content analysis of traditional media and social media, whilst leaving the door open for other themes or concepts to emerge. To achieve this aim, I conducted individual interviews and a survey with Shi'a and Sunni Iraqis. Similar to the approach adopted in the previous stage, I started with exploring the strength of 'Ashura rituals and their strategic uses, then moved to examining the symbolic meanings expressed by the rituals. Finally, I analysed the social outcomes, i.e., the ways the mourning rituals influenced or shaped Shi'a-Sunni relations.

As was noted in Chapter Five, I went through the data several times, adhering to the following stages: (a) breaking larger units into smaller ones, (b) getting an overall sense of data, (c) finding meanings in the data, and (d) summarizing the data. The analysis is presented under two headings: views of Shi'a participants (Group One), and views of Sunni participants (Group Two). All direct quotations from individual interviews are referred to as SH (Shi'a Iraqi Group One), and SU (Sunni Iraqi Group Two). A participation code number was assigned randomly to Shi'a and Sunni participants (Group One and Two) according to the number of participants in each group. For the thirty-eight SH participants, the code numbers are SH-1 to SH-38, and for the eighteen SU participants, the code numbers are SU-1 to SU-18. Themes emerging from conducting interviews are presented in the following order: the strength of 'Ashura rituals, the strategic use of 'Ashura rituals, symbolic meanings of the rituals, and social outcomes.

7.1.1 The strength of ‘Ashura rituals

In order to examine the strength of ‘Ashura rituals, questions were presented to both Shi‘a and Sunni Iraqis focusing on the four elements promulgated by SRT: salience, homologous-ness, repetitiveness, and resources. To determine ritual strength, questions included:

a. Do you practice or observe ‘Ashura rituals?
b. What kind of rituals do you practice?
c. How often do you practice the rituals?
d. How important are these rituals to you?
e. Are there any other important commemorations on the 10th of Muharram and why?
f. Where do the rituals take place?
g. How would you characterise the mourning rituals? Are they similar in meaning and form, are they different?
h. Can you please elaborate on aspect(s) of the commemoration that you feel more attached to and why?
i. What do you think of the frequency with which the ritualised practices are performed, and why?
j. How is the commemoration of ‘Ashura funded? and
k. Are there resources available to run/manage/maintain the commemoration?

7.1.1.1 The views of Shi‘a participants (Group One)

This analysis revealed a number of main themes in the data, which allowed for the identification of different concepts and categories including: (1) *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* is the most important and dominant ritual, (2) memorial services are the most repetitive rituals, (3) ‘Ashura rituals express similar meaning but they are different in forms, and (4) ‘Ashura rituals are well-funded.

***Ziyarat al-Arba‘in* is the most important and dominant ritual**. The majority of Shi‘a participants noted that in comparison to all other rituals, they are more attached to *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*. They cited that it has a significant religious value and it is the most recommended ritual to observe by the *marja‘iyya*. One participant noted:

> Observing *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* means you are a true believer because Imam Hasan al-Askari [the 11th Imam of the Shi‘a] explicitly stated that the signs of a true

> believer are five: praying five times a day, *ziyarat al-Arba'in*, wearing a ring on the right hand, prostration on soil, and proclaiming of *Bismillah* [In the Name of Allah] (SH-9).

Another participant reflected on the importance of *ziyarat al-Arba'in* by declaring:

> It is an experience of a lifetime. You must have heard that everyone should make this journey at least once in their life to experience it. You can hear about it from everyone around you, and you see pictures and videos, but you can only experience it when you undertake this journey. It will not be the same for everyone, and you may not feel the same feelings as everyone, but this why the *ziyarat al-Arba'in* is so different (SH-2).

In addition to being a highly recommended mourning ritual, participants also cited spirituality, unity, and intercessions as the main reasons for considering *ziyarat al-Arba'in* as the most significant ritual. One Shi'a participant noted that "the spirituality of the journey to visit Karbala on the *al-Arba'in* makes it very important to me. During *ziyarat al-Arba'in*, the simple normal things look and feel very interesting, peaceful, and beautiful" (SH-7). Another participant commented:

> You come across all kinds of people headed towards the same destination. On the way there, you bond with some people and continue your journey with them. You will remember all that you have done through your life and ask for forgiveness for all your sins. I also wondered how all of the people serving us are sustain their expenses, they looked happy to serve us. It would cost millions of dollars to feed millions of people walking daily (SH-6).

There were a few participants who commented that, "*ziyarat al-Arba'in* is very important to defeat those who want to harm us" (SH-8, SH-5, SH-17, SH-20). A participant who does not observe *ziyarat al-Arba'in* noted that "to me it is quite something because I know people that they have nothing to do with religion but for some reason they are committed to walking to Karbala for *ziyarat al-Arba'in*. A lot of people observe this particular ritual" (SH-12). Another Shi'a participant noted that "more and more people are doing *ziyara*. You see them everywhere, on main roads, in residential neighbourhoods, and on highways, which very different than other ways of commemorating 'Ashura" (SH-3).

Participants also identified a noticeable change in reference to observing *ziyarat al-Arba'in* before and after 2003. In that regard, a participant noted that "I remember in the 1950s, we observed *ziyarat al-Arba'in*, we use to take a bus with my family and neighbours to go to Karbala but it was

for one day. It was fun for me as a child at that time" (SH-5). This participant adds that "now is different, *ziyarat al-Arba'in* is a big deal and people stay in Karbala for days. People nowadays walk to Karbala, back then, we took buses" (SH-5).

The majority of Shi'a participants mentioned that *ziyarat al-Arba'in* is very visible. A participant noted that "you do not see people walking on highways that often so naturally, for me, the most visible form of rituals is processions of *al-Arba'in*" (SH-7). Participants also noted that the media plays an important role in the publicity of *ziyarat al-Arba'in.* In addition, 12 Shi'a participants (about 32%) reported that the importance and the spirituality of the rituals, especially *ziyarat al-Arba'in* have been exaggerated. A participant noted that "it is difficult to pin point all the buzz around *ziyarat al-Arba'in* and the fact that it started to define us as Iraqis" (SH-29). Another participant stated that:

> My friend kept asking me to join her to walk to Karbala for *ziyarat al-Arba'in.* She told me it is amazing, and spiritual. To begin with, I did not buy the concept but I did it anyway with her two years ago, and honestly, I was right, there was nothing in it. The most thing that struck me though is guys were harassing us (SH-17).

Furthermore, 60% of Shi'a participants in this research claimed that those who walk to Karbala mainly come from less privileged backgrounds in Shi'a provinces, or from working class Shi'a neighbourhoods in Baghdad such as al-Sadr city and al-Shuala. They also associated the pilgrims to Karbala with the *Shrug,* those from the east of the Tigris river, specifically those from south eastern Iraq. This term has acquired a derogatory association with working classes, particularly from the southern provinces; Najaf and Karbala being excluded. Overall, however, the majority of participants, especially those who observed *ziyarat al-Arba'in,* noted that it is the most important and visible ritual. It is also emerged that participants who downplayed the importance of *ziyarat al-Arba'in* were not in favour of any other ritual.

Repetitiveness. About 60% of Shi'a participants uttered these two main characteristics when describing the mourning rituals: it is practiced more frequently, and it is mainly practiced in Karbala. In terms of the repetitiveness of the rituals, the majority of Shi'a participants noted that numerous mourning rituals take place during the mourning period and some of them are practiced more frequently than others. A participant explained:

> Especially during Muharram and Safar, the mourning rituals become an unescapable part of our lives. You always hear about memorial services or processions happening somewhere. You get invited to attend memorial services. You watch them on TV, that is in addition to, of course, live coverage from Karbala, *latumiya* of Basim Karbalaei, sermons and religious songs" (SH-9).

Another participant mentioned that "it is a mourning period overall and different people have different ways of expressing their sorrow, but I would say memorial services are more recurring during Muharram and Safar" (SH-21). When participants discussed the element of repetitiveness of the mourning rituals, they recognised that the media and social media contribute to the repetitiveness of the mourning rituals. A participant mentioned that "I always watch live the rituals on television, I feel like I am there with them in Karbala. I cry and pray when I see the shrine of Imam Husayn. It is good there is a media coverage of the rituals" (SH-21). Another participant had a different opinion on the role of media: "it is way too much, Shi'a TV stations coverage of the mourning rituals during 'Ashura become like CNN coverage of a war, coverage day and night from Karbala, interviews with people, processions, and *latmiya*" (SH-33).

Shi'a participants who reside in Baghdad mentioned that, after 2003, fewer and fewer rituals are practiced in Baghdad; they are now mostly conducted in Karbala. A Shi'a participant explained:

> Memorial services used to be more popular but maybe because of terrorism, people in Baghdad are afraid to go to memorial services. I think, because of the situation in Baghdad, especially the attacks on Shi'a neighbourhoods, even cooking for charity is less often practiced nowadays. If you want to practice all of this go to Karbala, more people are going to Karbala for *ziyarat al-Arba'in* so they can also enjoy the freedom of observing other rituals. It is safer in Karbala (SH-4).

According to my data analysis, cooking for charity during the commemoration is the most popular and repeated practice. Many participants emphasised the popularity of cooking food for charity during the two month mourning period. A participant, in fact, described 'Ashura "as a festival of food noting that we enjoy as a family, cooking and giving food away for charity in the name of Imam Husayn. It is all for blessing" (SH-7). Participants noted that there are two aspects to the cooking: offering free food as a good deed and to receive a blessing; and cooking food because of *nether,* the cooking and distributing of food in the name of Husayn for a wish to be granted, related to intercession. Another popular ritual is attending memorial services. The analysis of the data

shows that attending memorial services in Baghdad is more popular for women than men. One female participant mentioned that "it changes from year to another, sometimes we get to be invited to many memorial services, other years, we get invited to only few" (SH-8). This participant added that "it usually gets busy in the first two weeks of Muharram" (SH-8).

The rituals express similar meaning: mourning and grief, but they are different in forms. The majority of Shi'a participants mentioned that the mourning rituals of 'Ashura are intended to express sadness over the killing of Husayn. A participant noted that:

> The idea behind any ritual you observe during the mourning period is to express sadness over the killing of Imam Husayn, the horrific treatment of women and children. Because of her age, my grandmother wears black for two months, day and night. That is her way of mourning. She cannot go to memorial services anymore (SH-14).

The examination of the views provided by Shi'a participants shows that, for 35% of Shi'a participants, performing the mourning rituals of 'Ashura is an essential part of their religious beliefs. They added that it is also part of their identity and tradition. Participants in this group noted that they are committed to other religious practices including praying and fasting. Another 35% of Shi'a participants mentioned that it is important to them to commemorate 'Ashura, but they believe that the rituals are not purely religious, rather they are a mix of religious concepts and other cultural traditions. For the remaining 30% of Shi'a participants, the rituals carry no importance for them. One participant noted that "it is crazy that people still believe in the religiosity of the mourning rituals of 'Ashura. They are tradition, and lack substance" (SH-7).

Based on participants' views, their level of devotion to the *marja'iyya* is a major factor in determining their commitment to 'Ashura rituals. Accordingly, Shi'a participants can be broadly divided into three main categories: devout Shi'a who acknowledge the authority of the *marja'iyya* and follow them; moderate Shi'a who acknowledge their authority but do not necessarily follow them; and Shi'a only by birth, who neither acknowledge their authority nor follow them. The analysis of the data shows that devout Shi'a regard 'Ashura rituals as religious practices. For them, religious belief and practices are very important and should not be subjected to debate and criticism. Moderate Shi'a believe in the religious aspects of the rituals, but are open to debate and criticism of various aspects of the rituals. Commemorating 'Ashura is important to members of

this group, but they tend to be critical of some of the practices involved. Some of them criticised the rituals of *tatbir* as harmful practices. Others believe that the excessive practices of ‘Ashura rituals, such as walking on highways to visit Karbala on *al-Arba‘in* are unnecessary. Within the moderate group are also Shi‘a participants who believe that some religious leaders exaggerate the way they express mourning and grief whilst delivering sermons in memorial services. For those who identified themselves as Shi‘a only by birth, the ‘Ashura rituals seem to be irrelevant in the sense that they do not see any merit in commemorating them. It should be noted, however, that the boundaries between these three categories are blurred, but it is useful to establish the categories to draw attention to the direct correlation between the practices of ‘Ashura rituals and the adherence to *marja‘iyya*. Finally, the majority of participants agreed that there are different forms of the mourning rituals. Based on their views, *tatbir* is the most distinctive form of the mourning rituals.

‘Ashura rituals are well funded. The majority of Shi‘a participants believe that ‘Ashura rituals are well-funded because the main source of funding is the people themselves. As one participant commented, “people are very generous when it comes to ‘Ashura, they usually do their best because it is for Husayn” (SH-11). Another participant explained that “whatever you do, whether cooking or organising memorial services, you do not ask people to help but people generally volunteer to help you and/or contribute money for ‘Ashura rituals, they all do it for Husayn for a blessing” (SH-7). However, fifteen of thirty-eight Shi‘a participants believed that some influential Shi‘a individuals within the Shi‘a religious establishment sponsor and provide funding for the mourning rituals, especially the mourning processions. Another ten Shi‘a participants believe that government officials and those who have positions within Shi‘a political parties, or Shi‘a militias, gave resources, including funding, to support organising memorial services, mourning processions, and cooking of food during the commemorations of ‘Ashura in 2014 and 2015. One Shi‘a participant residing in Baghdad, who I interviewed in 2016, noted that “last year, members of many Shi‘a political parties distributed a lot of cash for people to cook food and to conduct memorial services during ‘Ashura” (SH-5).

After exploring the views of Shi‘a participants with respect the questions asked in section 7.1.1, the views of Sunni participants in the interviews are presented in the following sections.

7.1.1.2 The views of Sunni participants (Group Two)

This analysis revealed a major theme in the data: The Sunni downplay the significance of the rituals.

The Sunni downplay the significance of the rituals. All Sunni participants in this research mentioned that they do not practice or engage in the mourning rituals of ‘Ashura, although three of the eighteen participants commented that they do tend to fast on ‘Ashura day. The participants who identified themselves as Sunni or Sunni Muslims downplayed the significance and dominance of the rituals. In response to questions asked related to the strength of ‘Ashura rituals, especially *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* and in contrast to Shi‘a participants, they seemed not to be interested in elaborating on the rituals. The majority of Sunni participants mentioned that they try to avoid any exposure to the rituals. Most of the them seem to be irritated by the processions of *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*. One participant noted that, in reference to the *mashaya* of *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* “it is an opportunity for the mobs to invade us” (SU-12). Another participant questioned “who authorises them to march in front of my house? Can I do the same on their streets, probably not, because I will be killed” (SU-6).

Based on their views of the rituals, Sunni participants can be divided into two main categories: moderate, in other words those who are tolerant of Shi‘a practices; and extreme, those who are intolerant of Shi‘a practices. Whilst the former see the rituals as traditions, the latter view them as heresy. The analysis of the Sunni views of ‘Ashura rituals shows that there is a correlation between the level of dissatisfaction with the socio-political elements of post-2003 Iraq and their intolerant views of the mourning rituals: the more they are dissatisfied, the more intolerant their views. Place of residence is also a factor here: participants who are not from mixed (Shi‘a and Sunni) communities, towns or cities, tend to be less tolerant of the commemoration of ‘Ashura. As an example, a Sunni participant who resides in a Shi‘a dominated neighbourhood in Baghdad was more accepting and tolerant of ‘Ashura rituals in comparison to a Sunni participant who resides in a Sunni dominated neighbourhood.

Overall, I would argue that the diversity of views of ‘Ashura rituals amongst Shi‘a participants is more noticeable than that of Sunni participants. Another relevant observation that emerged from conducting interviews with Sunni Iraqis is that, in contrast to Shi‘a participants where the majority

presented their views from a Shi‘a Muslims perspective, the majority of Sunni participants presented their views as Muslims with little emphasis on being Sunnis. However, when Sunni participants discussed issues related to ‘Ashura rituals, they referred to the participant of the rituals as Shi‘a.

In summary, it was important to elicit the views of Shi’a and Sunni participants on the strength of ‘Ashura rituals because it reveals that, based on the views of majority of the participants in the two groups, *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* is the most visible form of commemorating Husayn. The discussion in the following sections will be focused on the strategic use of ‘Ashura rituals based on the views of Shi‘a and Sunni participants in this thesis.

7.1.2 Rituals have been used strategically by the Shi‘a religious establishment

In order to explore whether the mourning rituals of ‘Ashura have been used strategically, eight questions were posed to Shi‘a and Sunni participants:

a. Who establishes the main rituals to be performed during the commemoration of ‘Ashura and what their reasons for doing this?
b. In your view, who is benefiting the most from the commemoration of ‘Ashura?
c. Who, if anyone, plays a key role in sponsoring the rituals and how do they benefit from it?
d. Who determines what events will take place?
e. Who makes decisions regarding the organisation of the processions?
f. How are the mourning processions route selected?
g. What do you think of the role of the government, security forces, and the media in the commemoration?
h. In your family/ community, who are the most enthusiastic in observing or practising the rituals?

7.1.2.1 The views of Shi‘a participants (Group One)

The majority of Shi‘a participants believe that the Shi‘a religious establishment is responsible for authorising and sponsoring ‘Ashura rituals. However, for most of them, the rituals are not newly established and thus they do not believe that they need instructions and opinions from the *marja‘iyya* every year on how to observe the mourning rituals. A Shi‘a participant who resides in Iraq noted that “yes of course the *marja‘iyya* authorise and endorses the mourning rituals but we

do not really wait for their instructions or ask about their opinions before we observe the rituals because we have been mourning Imam Husayn in Muharram for so long" (SH-23). Another Shi'a participant who also resides in Iraq explained:

> I do not think that anyone can argue that entities other than the *marja'iyya* can rule (issue a *fatwa*) on issues related to the commemoration of 'Ashura but you need to understand that there are many *maraji'* [*mujtahids*] within the *marja'iyya*. People follow different *maraji'* which can cause some contradictions in terms of *fatwas* about some of the rituals. For example, some *maraji'* believe that *tatbir* is permitted; others believe that it is not permitted. However, overall, the *maraji'* are in charge of the mourning rituals of 'Ashura (SH-18).

For 15 % of Shi'a participants, the *marja'iyya* endorsement of the mourning rituals is only for the good of the religion. In that regard, a participant noted: "the *marja'iyya* role in commemorating 'Ashura is to follow the wishes of the Imams. The *marja'iyya* is very much engaged in the commemoration because for them it is a yearly debate about good versus evil to keep checks and balances within Islam as a religion and that is their reward" (SH-13). For 65% of the participants, the *marja'iyya* endorsement of the commemoration has benefited Islam, but they have also profited from it. One Shi'a participant noted that "the whole commemoration elevates their status, makes them important in society" (SH-10). Three participants were of the view that the sole reason for the *marja'iyya* to commemorate 'Ashura is that so they can benefit financially. One of them mentioned that "the notion of crying for Husayn is just a 'show' to control naive people and make money out of them" (SH-22). Other participant noted that "they [*marja'iyya*] are all hypocrites, they cry and cry for Husayn in order to increase the number of visitors to Karbala to make money of them" (SH-17).

About 40 % of Shi'a participants believe that the *marja'iyya* has some sort of political role in Iraq and that they are using the commemoration of 'Ashura to enhance their political role. One participant noted that "most of them [religious leaders] use the commemoration to discuss their views about the political situation in Iraq. Nowadays, I do not think that you can listen to a sermon during 'Ashura without a reference to politics" (SH-33).

Participants also mentioned that *Qariea* (male reciter) and *Mulayea* (female reciter) benefit financially from 'Ashura rituals, especially for their role in memorial services. It has also emerged

that Shi‘a religious leaders, Shi‘a women, unprivileged Shi‘a (women and men), the uninformed or uneducated, and *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi* are more inclined than other groups to practice ‘Ashura rituals. According to many Shi‘a participants, *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi*, was responsible for providing security for the visitors of Karbala, and also in Shi‘a neighbourhoods in Baghdad during the commemoration of ‘Ashura. According to the view of one participant “security during the commemoration of ‘Ashura is mainly provided by forces of *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi* and without them, it would very difficult and almost impossible to travel to Karbala” (SH-26).

In terms of the organisation of ‘Ashura rituals, the majority of Shi‘a participants noted that the processions lack organisation. Many participants noted that except for the area around the shrine of Imam Husayn, where it is more organised, it is up to processions organisers to take the route they prefer, and at the time they prefer. Only 20% of Shi‘a participants acknowledged that the *al-‘atabat al-Muqadasa*, the Holy Shrines, are responsible of organising the processions, especially the processions of *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*. A participant mentioned that “the processions are all over the place here in Baghdad, especially in Shi‘a dominated neighbourhoods. Also, the organisers erect tents in the middle of the road if they want to held memorial services during ‘Ashura” (SH-11). Only four out of 38 Shi‘a participants were very satisfied with the organisation of *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*. One of them noted that “think about millions come and go to Karbala without incident, they all leave happy and satisfied, and it’s all because of Imam Husayn’s blessing” (SH-26).

7.1.2.2 <u>The views of Sunni participants (Group Two)</u>

The majority of Sunni participants also believe that the *marja‘iyya* sponsors and promotes the mourning rituals of ‘Ashura. In addition, many Sunni participants seem to believe that the mourning rituals and other traditions have been initially authorised by the Shi‘a religious establishment in Iran and then endorsed by the Shi‘a religious establishment in Iraq. One Sunni participant indicated that “without the influence of Iran, commemorating Karbala would not be as sectarian as we have seen recently” (SU-5). Another Sunni participant provided a different view of the strategic use of ‘Ashura rituals:

> Our neighbour who lives in this big nice house used to work for one of the Shi‘a [political] parties, not sure what happened but he was forced out. To impress Amar al Hakeem [a pro-Iranian Iraqi cleric and politician who led the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq from 2009 to 2017] who lives in this neighbourhood, this guy

> blocked our street on ‘Ashura day and cooked [with many others], I think there were more than twelve big pots on the street (SU-7).

As for ritual enforcers, my data analysis suggests that the majority (65%) of Sunni participants think that the commemorations of ‘Ashura have been used by Shi‘a religious establishment for sectarian purposes. A theme repeated by Sunni participants was that of the abusive power of *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi* towards Sunni Iraqis. The majority of Sunni participants believe that *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi* is a sectarian force created by the Shi‘a religious establishment, which is loyal to Iran. Many mentioned stories related to the militia’s abuse of power, whether in terms of harassment and discrimination on the basis of ‘first name’, detention on suspicion of terrorism activities, and forced dislocation. Participants also commented that as a sign of prevalence over ISIS groups, members of Shi‘a militias started to practice the rituals excessively and purposefully in Sunni majority cities. One Sunni participant from Mosul commented in 2018 that “it is really disgusting to see a group of *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi* practising the mourning rituals in Mosul University, I cannot stand them” (SU-11). Another Sunni participant who resides in the UK noted that “I feel agitated when I see them [*al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi*] practicing the rituals” (SU-12).

Overall, the majority of Sunni participants and about 40% of Shi‘a participants believe that the commemoration is used for purposes other than commemorating the tragedy of Karbala. After exploring the strength and strategic uses of rituals, the focus of the second stage shifted to examine the symbolic meanings expressed by ‘Ashura rituals.

7.1.3 Symbolic meaning of the rituals

One of the central tenets of SRT is to explore the symbolic meaning carried or communicated through rituals, because exploring these symbols helps in understanding the impact of rituals on social order. To facilitate this understanding, the following questions were posed to Shi‘a and Sunni participants:

a. What does it mean to you to observe ‘Ashura rituals?
b. Can you please explain to me what message(s), if any, you are trying to convey by commemorating ‘Ashura and why?
c. In your view, what does the overall commemoration symbolise?

d. Is there a sense of religious superiority emerging among the Shi‘a community in Iraq as a result of participation in these rituals?

The data shows that Shi‘a and Sunni provided different views and thus, their views will be presented separately.

7.1.3.1 The views of Shi‘a participants (Group One)

Based on the views of Shi‘a participants, ‘Ashura rituals symbolise the following themes: loyalty to the Imam Husayn and *ahl al-bayt*, and counter-repression and response to threat.

Loyalty to the Imam Husayn

The commemoration of ‘Ashura represents loyalty to the Imam Husayn and *ahl al-bayt*. Based on the analysis of data collected through individual interviews and the survey, the majority of the Shi‘a participants believe to a varying degree in the sacrifice of Husayn, irrespective of their religiosity and piousness. Many participants noted that by commemorating ‘Ashura, they see themselves as the followers of Imam Husayn and *ahl al-bayt*. One participant noted that “the commemoration is an important time because it is a time when you need to visibly express your views; which side are you on?” (SH-4). Other participant noted that “it is a belief passed on from one generation to another” (SH-19). About 40% of Shi‘a participants reported that, as followers of *ahl al-bayt*, they also believe in intercession. One participant mentioned that “Husayn is no ordinary person, so the Shi‘a cry, weep, practice flagellations and *tatbir*, and all other forms of rituals to communicate with their Imam” (SH-14). One Shi‘a participant mentioned that “the Shi‘a regard Husayn as a saviour, a crucial part of our belief system” (SH-3).

In response to the question posed ‘is there a sense of religious superiority emerging among the Shi‘a community in Iraq as a result of participation in these rituals’, my analysis of the data shows that the majority of Shi‘a participants do not think about commemorating the tragedy of Karbala in this way, i.e., they do not compare themselves to others and thus establish that they are more religiously superior than others. For the majority of Shi‘a participants, commemorating ‘Ashura is part of their beliefs and traditions. One participant noted that “we mourn the tragedy of Karbala because this is our religion, our Imams emphasised expressing grief over the killing of Husayn, so we are not doing extra but we are following our religion” (SH-24). Another participant noted, “it is not a matter of superiority, it is a matter of right and wrong. We remember Husayn because of

his great sacrifice, he stood up to save Islam, and it was very difficult thing to do, but he did it and that is why we commemorate him" (SH-9). A third participant responded by arguing that the Shi'a do not want to claim that they are superior because they commemorate 'Ashura, and that "we just want the Sunni to stop denigrating the commemoration of 'Ashura" (SH-5). For this participant (SH-5), commemorating 'Ashura is a Shi'a right:

> No, it is not a superiority issue but we just need them to stop condemning 'Ashura rituals. Even if we worship a cow, aren't we free to do that to worship anything we like. Look at people in the UK, they can practise anything, why is it an issue for the Sunni if we practise 'Ashura? It is our right, do we judge them because they like Omar [in reference to the second rightly-guided caliph who in the view of Shi'a was one of the people who disputed 'Ali's right to be the successor of the Prophet]?

Overall, commemorating 'Ashura represent loyalty to Husayn. In addition to Husayn, many participants mentioned *ahl al-bayt*, as well. The other symbolic meanings of commemorating 'Ashura are to counter repression and response to threat.

Counter-repression and response to threat

The theme of counter-repression emerged when participants reflected on their experience commemorating 'Ashura before 2003, under the Saddam Hussein regime. As one Shi'a participant commented, "it is always we [the Shi'a] as if we need to be contained or apprehended" (SH-3). Another participant mentioned that you "almost need to defend yourself for being a Shi'a. We are not violating any rules by commemorating 'Ashura, this is our right" (SH-11). A participant who practices the rituals emphasised that "for a long time, we had been overruled by the Sunni and have been always criticised for commemorating 'Ashura" (SH-3). This participant added that questions and criticisms are endless: "why do you do this, why do you cook and waste food, why do not donate to charity instead, why do you block streets, etc." (SH-3). Accordingly, practising the rituals can be seen an act to counter the Sunni attitude toward the Shi'a, as if the Shi'a are trying to make noises as loudly as possible in order to be heard and challenge criticism.

Another major theme that emerged from the data analysis is that the 'Ashura rituals become more prominent when the Shi'a feel threatened. This theme is emerged when Shi'a participants presented their views on the commemoration of 'Ashura after 2003. The majority of Shi'a participants discussed and reflected on their experience with terrorism. The emphasis on this issue draws a link between 'threat' and 'rituals'. One Shi'a participant mentions that "I have never

commemorated ‘Ashura nor believed in the concept but after the attack on al-Askari Mosque in the shrine city of Samarra, I walked to Karbala for *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*” (SH-7). Another participant noted that “I listened before to the stories of the suffering of *ahl al-bayt* during ‘Ashura but did not really affect me the way it did now. I really feel attached to these stories now and I do believe given the way they [terrorist groups] hate us that it was hell for *ahl al-bayt* and Imams at that time” (SH-17). Overall, the symbolic meaning of commemorating ‘Ashura corresponds to the views of Shi‘a participants prior to and post 2003 because prior to 2003, they felt repressed and post-2003 they felt attacked. In the following sections, the symbolic meanings of ‘Ashura rituals from the views of Sunni participants are presented.

7.1.3.2 The views of Sunni participants (Group Two)

For the majority of Sunni participants, ‘Ashura rituals symbolise ignorance, and sectarian attitudes.

Ignorance

For the majority of Sunni Iraqi participants, the way the Shi‘a commemorate ‘Ashura symbolises ignorance. A participant argued “I am not sure why the Shi‘a see these practices during ‘Ashura as religious, they are meaningless” (SU-7). Another participant noted that “Shi‘a are not informed about the reasons for commemorating ‘Ashura, as they tend to follow their *marja‘iyya* without asking questions” (SU-9). One participant described the Shi‘a “as brain-washed, most of the rituals they practice during ‘Ashura does not fit within the main religious practices of Islam; they contradict the Islamic principles” (SU-3). Another participant (SU-5) noted:

> When I was younger, a Shi‘a friend invited me to go to Al-Kadhemiyya to watch the mourning rituals. I still cannot forget the images of young boys, really young almost one or two years old, getting their forehead cut by a knife, during the *tatbir* ritual. This only shows stupidity and ignorance.

Based on their views, that the majority of Sunni participants do not believe that the rituals have religious value. About 50% of Sunni participants believe that the Shi‘a have invented these rituals and see them as un-Islamic. One participant noted that “they [the Shi‘a] keep inventing these rituals. Every year, you hear about a new ritual, a new saying attributed to Karbala, a new story, a new shrine. They are all baseless” (SU-9). This participant added that “there are a lot of songs about Karbala nowadays, did the Prophet or the Imams listen to songs as a way of mourning?”

(SU-9). The majority of participants believe that ‘Ashura rituals are traditions that pass from one generation to another without really thinking about the consequences.

Aligning with their view of the Shi‘a as ignorant in their practices, three Sunni participants also questioned the management of resources generated during the commemoration of ‘Ashura. One participant asked, “who is benefiting from the millions of visitors to Iraq during *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*?” (SU-11). A theme of ‘wasting resources’ during the commemoration of ‘Ashura was repeated by five participants (SU-1, SU-2, SU-3, SU7, SU8). A participant noted that “instead of wasting food as a result of the excessive cooking, money should be invested in building schools, hospitals, or simply giving the resources to the poor” (SU-3). Another Sunni participant mentioned the lack of any political and economic progress in Iraq “because the *marja‘iyya* and that Shi‘a officials have nothing to offer but *latum*” (SU-11).

Sectarian attitudes

Around 65% of Sunni participants mentioned that the ways in which some Shi‘a practice ‘Ashura rituals reflect sectarian attitudes. One participant noted that “the commemoration of ‘Ashura is all about the Shi‘a and their beliefs and nothing about Iraq” (SU-8). This participant added that “it is the time when they talk about their side of the story [in reference to Karbala], they mourn the people that matter the most to them, and curse people they hate the most” (SU-8). The other reason for seeing the rituals as repressing sectarian attitudes is because Sunni historical figures get cursed and insulted during the commemoration. One participant said that “even if you want us to understand that you are mourning, why do you curse some of the Prophet’s companions during the commemoration. Some of them were praised by the Prophet” (SU-2).

Also, three out of 18 Sunni participants believe that the Shi‘a militias think that the Sunni Iraqis are related to those who killed Husayn in Karbala. In addition, ten participants referenced the relations between Shi‘a Iraqis and Shi‘a Iranians during the commemoration. In that regard, a participant noted, “during the commemoration, Iraq becomes a Shi‘a centre for all the Shi‘a” (SU-16). For many Sunni participants, welcoming huge numbers of Iranians visitors to Iraq during the commemoration symbolised sectarian attitudes of Iraqi government. Many Sunni participants commented that Iraq has no to little control of its border with Iran.

Many participants also mentioned that overemphasising the tragedy of Karbala has sectarian connotations, because it dwells on one of the most tragic conflicts between Muslims (SU-2, SU-3, SU-4, SU-7, SU, 8, SU11, SU12, SU-13, SU-14). A participant notes "why the Shi'a do not mourn others Imams including Husayn's father, 'Ali, the way they mourn Husayn in Karbala?" Sunni participants also noted that 'Ashura rituals changed after 2003 becoming "provocative", "annoying", and "staged" (SU-1, SU, 2, SU-3, SU-7, SU8, SU9, SU-10, SU-16). A participant noted that, before 2003, they were seen as "one of those societal or community activities that you do not necessarily agree with but you can understand" (SU-10). Furthermore, 60% of the Sunni participants disputed and doubted the Shi'a claim that they were denied their right to commemorate 'Ashura pre-2003. Four Sunni participants mentioned that the Sunni used to participate in some of 'Ashura rituals before 2003. A participant remembered that "Sunni women in particular used to attend memorial services, but this has become rare post-2003" (SU-16).

In summary, data analysis of participants' perspectives suggests that for Shi'a participants, 'Ashura rituals symbolise loyalty to Imam Husayn and *ahl al-bayt*, counter-repression and response to threat, and for the Sunni participants, the rituals symbolise ignorance and sectarian attitudes. Overall, the Shi'a participants were more willing to discuss their views of 'Ashura rituals than the Sunni participants. The Shi'a participants felt more comfortable, spoke freely and even criticised the rituals whereas Sunni participants were more cautious about expressing their views of 'Ashura rituals. After exploring rituals' strength, strategic use of rituals, and their symbolic meanings, an examination of the way these three intertwined notions is manifested in Shi'a-Sunni relations is presented in the following sections.

7.1.4 Social outcome

In a similar way to the data collection used to obtain the perspectives of Shi'a and Sunni participants on the dominance of 'Ashura rituals and their symbolic meanings, questions were posed them to explore in which way(s), if any, the rituals impact/influence or shape Shi'a-Sunni relations in Iraq, in particular:

a. What does 'Ashura mean for the participants in relation to the place they hold in Iraqi in society?
b. What does 'Ashura mean for non-participants in relation to the place they hold in Iraqi society?

c. How do ‘Ashura rituals influence the pre-existing (sectarian) dynamics in Iraqi society?

In the analysis of the responses to these questions, it emerged that the outcomes of commemorating ‘Ashura are: triumph, from the perspective of Shi‘a participants, and division and intimidation from the perspective of Sunni participants.

7.1.4.1 The views of Shi‘a participants (Group One): triumph

For the majority of Shi‘a participants, there is a sense of triumph emerging from commemorating ‘Ashura. A participant noted that “I walked from Najaf to Karbala during *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* two years ago with many others. That was a triumph for me and when I see or hear about other processions taken place in different cities and countries, I feel this is a victory from Allah” (SH-17). Another participant mentioned, “terrorists want to prevent us from commemorating ‘Ashura, from going to Karbala. But if you see how many people go to Karbala for *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* you will know that they [terrorists] are defeated” (SH-3). For five participants, triumph emerged from fulfilling religious duty and from a spiritual experience. A participant noted “I feel liberated, relieved when I go to Karbala” (SH-34). As another participant mentioned, “practicing the mourning rituals helps you to get things out off your chest” (SH-23). Positive terms such as “sense of relief”, “good feelings”, and “community gathering”, were all used by Shi‘a participants to describe their experience commemorating ‘Ashura (SH-2, SH-3, SH-4, SH-5, SH-12, SH-19, SH-23, SH-24, SH-25).

Participants also mentioned that the rituals empower participants when they discussed the involvement of *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi* in ‘Ashura rituals. One participant mentioned that “in hard times, you get closer to Allah by mourning the tragedy of Karbala” (SH-6). Another participant noted that “the victory comes from Allah and Allah blesses and protects Husayn followers (in reference to members of *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi*)” (SH-9). Whilst the majority of participants acknowledged that Shi‘a political parties are involved in organising, sponsoring, and participating in the commemoration, around 5% of Shi‘a participants recognised that the commemoration of ‘Ashura is contributing to asserting the dominance of Shi‘a political parties.

In terms of impact of ‘Ashura rituals on Shi‘a-Sunni relations, about 60% of Shi‘a participants noted that they recognise that the rituals can irritate the Sunni. In an interview with a Shi‘a participant, I asked about the consequences of commemorating ‘Ashura in Iraq. This participant (SH-5) response was:

> The Sunni do not like it when we commemorate ‘Ashura and they do not like the fact they cannot control us anymore and prevent us from commemorating ‘Ashura. You know before 2003, you did not hear anything about Karbala, saying of *ahl al-bayt*, their sacrifice, nothing. So now, when we talk about Karbala, visit Karbala, and show our love to Imam Husayn, Zainab, and *ahl al-bayt*, it does not suit them.

Another participant (SH-7) noted:

> The problem with the Sunni is that they want us to be beaten and humiliated, and if we rise up, then we deserve to be killed in their views. Look what is happing in Bahrain, now, similar to what happen to us during the Ba‘ath regime (in reference to the rule of the Ba‘ath Party).

Based on the views provided from Shi‘a participants, there is repeated reference to their negative experience pre-2003, which suggests that the social outcomes of the commemoration of ‘Ashura after 2003 are related to their experience of pre-2003. One of the Shi‘a participants described the Shi‘a situation under the rule of Saddam Hussein:

> I understand that Saddam was hard on all people, and the pressure was directed on all of us [Iraqis], but Saddam targeted Shi‘a in particular. We were not able to practice ‘Ashura. Saddam arrested many Shi‘as; deported many of them to Iran for no reason [other] than they were Shi‘a. Saddam also targeted many prominent Shi‘a religious leaders, imprisoned them, and executed them (SH-3).

Within the elements that impact Shi‘a-Sunni relations, many participants mentioned that terrorism created tension between the Shi’a and the Sunni. As one participant (SH-11) explained:

> In 2007, people went crazy, almost every day on my way to work, I saw dead bodies lying on the side of the streets. Not sure why they were killing each other (the Shi‘a and the Sunni) but it was a terrifying time. The kidnapping took its toll on us, too. Unrecognised phone calls were terrifying fearing that a family member or someone we know was kidnapped. We became suspicious of neighbours, co-workers, and even friends because of the stories you hear about killing and kidnaping.

Around 30% of Shi‘a participants also reported that the Sunni socially withdrew after 2003 when the Shi‘a openly started to commemorate ‘Ashura. A participant noted that:

> To be honest, they were more engaging during the commemoration of ‘Ashura in the 1990s. We even use to go to Karbala and Najaf with them. Now, they keep their distance. We will not give up on the commemoration, our rituals and beliefs just because they do not like it (SH-32).

In summary, the majority of the views provided by Shi‘a participants describing the outcome of commemorating ‘Ashura in positive terms. Also, the majority of participants recognise that the rituals are not received positively by the Sunni but they are not about to change the way they commemorate ‘Ashura.

7.1.4.2 The views of Sunni participants (Group Two): Division and intimidation

The majority of Sunni participants believe that the ‘Ashura rituals create divisions between the Shi‘a and the Sunni. They highlighted different aspects about the rituals that agitate them. In that regard, a participant noted that “the provocative way of commemorating ‘Ashura divides society. Iraq becomes unbearable during the commemoration. Literally everything is shut down and all you see is black” (SU-4). Another Sunni participant commented “I really cannot stand them [walkers for *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*] going through our neighbourhood again, who give them the right to do that. Some of them even look suspicious, they pass by day and night” (SU2). Another participant mentions that the rituals underscore the differences between the Shi‘a and the Sunni because “‘Ashura gives some Shi‘as the opportunity not only for Shi‘a religious leaders, but also idiots to curse and insult some of the Prophet companions that we respect” (SU-11). Because of the commemoration of ‘Ashura, four of eighteen participants questioned the loyalty of the Shi‘a to Iraq. One participant argued that “‘Ashura rituals allow Shi‘a Iraqis to present Iraq in a very different way, a Shi‘a Iraq with many Iranians” (SU-6).

Five participants postulated that some Shi‘a groups use the mourning rituals of ‘Ashura to intimidate the Sunnis. A participant noted, “everything about *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi* is sectarian and linked to Karbala. The flags, the *latum,* and the language they use [many references to their Imams and the *marja‘iyya*]. I cannot stand them” (SU-13). Another participant mentioned that “*al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi* sees us as the enemy; they call us ISIS and Ba‘athists” (SU-12). Participants also reported that they themselves, relatives or people they know have been harassed and/or detained by members of *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi* during or before the start of ‘Ashura rituals. One Sunni participant who resides in Baghdad recounted that her sister, who lived for over twenty years in a city near the shrine city of Samarra, was forced to leave her house by Shi‘a militias (SU-2). This participant explained that “under the pretext of providing security for the people who visit Karbala during *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*, Shi‘a militias harass and/or arrest Sunnis to intimidate them in order to create safe paths for people travelling to Karbala” (SU-2). Another participant mentioned a similar story

in which his parents had to move from Tarmiyah, a town near Baghdad, because they were harassed by Shi‘a militias (SU-7). Within the context of harassment, two Sunni participants reported that Shi‘a militias commemorate ‘Ashura in recently liberated Sunni cities, which they find agitating and inappropriate (SU-7 and SU-8). Both of them described it as a sectarian act. Within the theme of intimidation, a Sunni participant mentioned that “there are no public Sunni gatherings allowed, not even to celebrate religious events, except for the anniversary of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad” (SU-17).

When Sunni participants discussed their views on the overall impact of ‘Ashura rituals on Iraqi society, many of them referenced other issues that influenced Iraqi society negatively including the sectarian government, the dominance of sectarian religious views, and foreign influence including Iran. During an interview in 2016 with a Sunni participant, who is married to a Shi‘a and who resides in a middle-class neighbourhood in Baghdad, I asked her views on the impact of the rituals. This participant responded to the question by saying “there has been so many crazy things going on in Iraq and this [‘Ashura] is one of them” (SU-3). She added that:

> We have seen killing and kidnapping, suicide attacks, no jobs, no respect to humans, they even placed pictures of Khomeini [the leader of the Iranian revolution] here in Baghdad, showing no respect for Iraqis who died in the Iraq-Iran War. You know my family house is in al-Mansour [a majority Sunni neighbourhood in Baghdad], we cannot go there because there is only one entrance to it, a check point controlled by Shi‘a militias, and it takes of lot of time to get in and out this place. It is just miserable here (SU-3).

Overall, based on Sunni responses to interview questions and the survey, the commemoration creates division between the Shi‘a and the Sunni, and also seen as form of intimidation.

7.2 Summary of stage two of data analysis

Stage two of the data analysis focused on eliciting views from Shi‘a and Sunni Iraqis residing in Iraq or in the UK with respect to the impact of ‘Ashura rituals on Shi‘a-Sunni relations in Iraq. The data analysis highlights the dominance of ‘Ashura rituals especially *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*. It also underscores the strategic use of the commemoration of ‘Ashura by the Shi‘a religious establishment. Furthermore, the analysis reveals that from the perspective of Shi‘a participants, the rituals represent a loyalty to Imam Husayn, and a counter-threat, whilst based on the views of

Sunni participants, ‘Ashura rituals symbolise ignorance, and sectarian attitudes. In terms of social outcomes, Shi‘a participants noted that there is a sense of triumph emerges as a result of commemorating ‘Ashura whilst for Sunni participants the rituals are contributing to dividing Shi‘a and Sunni Iraqis and they also see the rituals as form of intimidation.

Conducting this stage of the analysis was necessary to understand how ‘Ashura rituals have affected Shi‘a-Sunni relations in Iraq, but it also raised some important issues that need clarification. Therefore, in the final stage, these issues were presented to key Shi‘a and Sunni informants for their views and feedback.

7.3 Third Stage: Themes Result from Informant Interviews

The aim of conducting the key informant interviews was to seek feedback and clarification on ambiguous issues raised in the first and second stages of data collection, whilst at the same time allowing for the emergence of new themes and concepts. In stage three of the data collection and analysis, I clarified and contextualised the views discussed by key informants and presented them in the four categories established by SRT: ‘Ashura rituals’ strength, their strategic use, symbolisms expressed through rituals, and social outcome of commemorating ‘Ashura. Similar to the previous stage, a participation code number was assigned randomly to Shi‘a and Sunni key informants (Group Three) according to the number of participants in each group. For the five Shi‘a (SHK) key informants, the code numbers are SHK-1 to SHK-5, and for the two Sunni (SUK) participants, the code numbers are SUK-1 and SUK-2.

7.3.1 Rituals’ strength

The key informants were asked to provide their views on the dominance of *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*. Different perspectives were provided by Shi‘a and Sunni key informants.

7.3.1.1 The views of Shi‘a key informants

Shi‘a key informants commented that *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* is indeed the most visible and powerful mourning ritual. One key informant sees it as an achievement and was very proud of the fact that Shi‘a from all over the world come to Karbala to commemorate the anniversary of Husayn (SHK-1). Another key informant describes it as a powerful, peaceful gathering aimed at reviving Husayn’s principles in fighting terrorism (SHK-2). This latter key informant explained the reasons for the dominance of *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* during the threat of ISIS:

> *Al-Arba'in* is significant because it does not only commemorate the killing of Husayn in Karbala but also the walk [to Karbala] to honour the sacrifice of the caravan of the captive, the women of Husayn's camp including his sister Zainab, who were paraded by Yazid's army from one city to another yet never surrendered or gave up. A very popular slogan uttered during *al-Arba'in*, the *heiha'at mina al-thelia* (never to humiliation), is the Shi'a rejecting the way Husayn's womenfolk were humiliated. Thus, in contrast to all other rituals, it does not only honour the dead but also the humiliated (SHK-2).

This key informant added that the Shi'a commemorate two major events of the tragedy of Karbala, 'Ashura and the fortieth, noting that "whilst 'Ashura gives voice to Husayn and his rationale for the uprising, from perhaps a theological perspective, *ziyarat al-Arba'in* gives voice to Zainab to reflect on what happened in Karbala, from a human perspective, if you wish" (SHK-2). According to this key informant, "people seem to connect with the human perspective more than anything else", adding that "there are very emotional speeches attributed to Zainab, reflecting on the suffering and the humiliation Husayn's camp experienced, and also the bravery expressed, way more than speeches attributed to Imam Husayn (SHK-2). This is because, according to this key informant, Imam Husayn is infallible and within the Shi'a doctrine, the speeches of the infallibles are more well-documented and preserved than the narratives of members of *ahl al-bayt*, who are not infallible, including Zainab. For all of these reasons, the key informant added, *ziyarat al-Arba'in* ritual resonates with the masses especially, given the threat from terrorism to destroy us, the Shi'a, and therefore it is a very popular and dominant ritual (SHK-2).

Another view provided by a Shi'a key informant (SHK-5) is that *ziyarat al-Arba'in* is the oldest mourning ritual practiced by the Shi'a:

> The *ziyara* has its roots across history, one of the oldest rituals and the most significant one. The emphasis to uphold the remembrance of Imam Husayn and to connect emotionally with the tragedy, including the highlighting of the immense reward of walking to his shrine, has been encouraged by *ahl al-bayt*. This is not for ritualistic purposes though. Rather, for teachings and bringing people closer to Allah.

The popularity of *ziyarat al-Arba'in* can also relate to the community-based feature of this ritual in comparison to other rituals. A key informant explained that, in comparison to other rituals, *ziyarat al-Arba'in* is not a gendered-based ritual; the entire family can observe the rituals together

especially, those who walk to Karbala on foot, *mashaya*. This key informant added that some family members, even though they do not consider themselves to commemorate ‘Ashura as such, still get involved in one way or another (SHK-4). He adds that, for example;

> If a mother observed the commemoration, and cooked food, for example, on ‘Ashura day for Husayn, and when a family member helps with preparing and/or distributing the food to others, this means that they participated already in the commemoration even though they told [you] that ‘we do not practice’.

He provided another example:

> When a mother or mother-in-law wants to visit Karbala for *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*, they will ask their sons or daughters and those in turn usually if they decided to go they usually take his/her family with them particularly if they have children. In this way, you probably see a minibus full of people on their way to Karbala but only a few who actually want to do the *ziyara*. But when I say that, I do not deny that some, particularly the young, you see them out during ‘Ashura just for fun, eating whilst socialising with their friends.

However, this key informant clarified this latter point, noting that:

> This happens everywhere even during the rituals of *hajj*, can you confirm that all pilgrims go there with the intent of doing pilgrimage in Mecca? The answer is no, but should we abolish the rituals of *hajj* because some people go there for other purposes, the answer is no. Not only that but bad people go to Mecca for *hajj* including criminals and dictators, should we ban the *hajj* because of this, of course not.

Another Shi‘a key informant (SHK-3) also commented on the dominance of *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*, basing his views on the spiritual dimension of the rituals:

> One of the main reasons for the huge turnout or participation in *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* is the belief; the Shi‘a believe in the commemoration; call it whatever, belief, tradition, or simply something that we grow up on observing. The general approach from most of *marja‘iyya* is that it is up to them (the Shi‘a) to commemorate the tragedy of Karbala in their own ways and in their own terms; walk, eat, do *latum* do *tatbir*, it is up to each community and individual to commemorate ‘Ashura. The important thing is that they commemorate.

This key informant added that:

> In this life, it is easy to commit sins but there are also easy ways for redemption. There are hard ways and there are easy ways and one of the easiest ways for redemption is to commemorate ‘Ashura. You commemorate ‘Ashura in your own ways and you will be rewarded generously.

Different views about the dominance of *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* were provided by Sunni key informants as discussed in the following sections.

7.3.1.2 The views of Sunni key informants

Although both key informants recognised that the mourning processions including *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* are the most visible form of the commemoration, they considered that the whole commemoration is blown out of proportion. They also acknowledge the role of the media, including social media, for amplifying the visibility of these processions. One of them mentioned that “the government, the religious establishment, *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi*, and even Iran support *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*, so of course it is visible” (SUK-1). The other key informant described *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* as a form of invasion (SUK-2).

Furthermore, in order to clarify some of the themes emerged from previous stages of data analysis, the key informants were asked their views on the notion that, after the liberation of Sunni cities from ISIS in 2017, more reports on social media suggest that Sunni are getting involved in the commemoration. In response, a key informant rejected these reports as propaganda, arguing “I do not believe that the Sunni, all of a sudden, started to commemorate ‘Ashura, the Shi‘a way. Why? Why would they do this?” (SUK-1). This key informant added that “there could be an element of intimidation, that some Sunni practice the rituals of ‘Ashura out of fear, to appease Shi‘a militias, to show that they are on their side” (SUK-1). In the view of the key informant, though, “it is mostly Shi‘a militias who commemorate ‘Ashura in recently liberated Sunni cities, reflecting the spreading of Shi‘ism to intimidate the Sunnis” (SUK-1). He further stated that “the Shi‘a know how to play on emotions and use emotions to attract people to the episode of Karbala in order to spread Shi‘ism”, opining it is for this reason that Shi‘a are not allowed to commemorate ‘Ashura in most Arab countries (SUK-1).

Overall, Shi‘a and Sunni key informants validated the major theme regarding the prominence of *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* and also clarified other issues that emerged from the previous stages. In the

following sections, the views of key informants on the second category of SRT, the strategic use of ‘Ashura rituals, are presented.

7.3.2 Strategic use of *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* by the Shi‘a religious establishment

Key informants were asked to provide their views on the strategic use of the mourning rituals. Given that there is no equivalent to the word ‘strategic’ in the Arabic language, an issue that arose from the second stage of data analysis, it was necessary to clarify what it means, particularly within the context of religious rituals. I noticed that whilst interviewing Shi‘a and Sunni participants there was a discussion around the meaning of ‘strategic’ particularly for those participants who are classified as ‘devout Shi‘a’. This issue was therefore raised and discussed with key informants to elicit their views. It turned out that the word strategic has many different interpretations in the Arabic language. From the perspectives of Shi‘a key informants, the mourning rituals have a crucial and positive role in keeping Islam as a religion alive whilst from the perspectives of Sunni key informants, these rituals have been used to benefit the Shi‘a religious establishment and their supporters.

7.3.2.1 The views of Shi‘a key informants

The Shi‘a key informants were asked to comment on one of the major themes that emerged from previous stages of data analysis, concerning the strategic use of mourning rituals in general and *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* in particular, by the Shi‘a clerical authority in order to unite the Shi‘a and intimidate their enemies, especially ISIS. Key informants supported the finding and responded in their own terms. One of them noted:

> Typically, during a challenging time, you look up to Husayn and it is not only the Shi‘a. Mahatma Gandhi in his struggle looked up to Imam Husayn. Commemorating the tragedy of Imam Husayn has many dimensions and is manifested in different ways. For example, *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* becomes more relevant than other rituals when you need to show solidarity i.e., when you need to response or react to something publicly. The Shi‘a religious establishment emphases *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* to show that they not alone in this struggle with terrorism especially when the visitation does not only reflect the spiritual importance of Karbala, but also the participants’ way of saying never to humiliation. The massive numbers of participants walking to Karbala in defiance of terrorist threats scare terrorist groups. We are not talking about a few, we are

> talking about millions who are determined to visit the same place that ISIS desperately tried to attack and demolish (SHK-1).

Another key informant explained that:

> The *marja'iyya* sponsors and promotes the visitation of *al-Arba'in* because it is fully aware that the visitation reflects many important aspects of Iraqi Shi'a. It revives their traditions, it reveals the system of social unity amongst the many Shi'a and consequently helps show this group's strength and helps the group to maintain its own identity, particularly in challenging times (SHK-2).

The rationale for the Shi'a religious establishment emphasising *ziyarat al-Arba'in* is best articulated by a Shi'a key informant: "The Shi'a clerical authority is aware that any religion that does not manifest itself in popular ritualised practices observed by the masses is a dead religion" (SHK-3). Another key informant noted that "all religious rituals have a purpose, and 'Ashura rituals are no different, when you practice the rituals you activate your belief" (SHK-4). Finally, another Shi'a key informant commented that:

> When I was at a conference, a Catholic priest approached me and asked how is it that your religious places are almost full and ours are almost empty. My answer was it is all because our religious leaders keep religious places full by emphasising the sacrifice of Imam Husayn and the humiliation of his family (SHK-5).

Overall, from the perspectives of Shi'a key informants, *ziyarat al-Arba'in* shows group solidarity and thus has a crucial and positive role in intimidating terrorist groups. In addition, generally, the strategic use of religious practices means keeping people closer to their faith and subsequently keeping the faith alive.

7.3.2.2 <u>The views of Sunni key informants</u>

From the perspectives of Sunni key informants, the notion of the strategic use of the mourning rituals, especially *ziyarat al-Arba'in* is interpreted in the sense that the majority of the Shi'a are manipulated by the Shi'a religious establishment. One Sunni key informant opined, albeit cautiously, that "the strategic use of the commemoration of 'Ashura means that the majority of the Shi'a have been used by the Shi'a religious establishment for their own benefit, to strengthen their base and to legitimise their position" (SUK-1). This key informant notes that "every rational and non-biased person would tell you that the rituals of 'Ashura have been used for other purposes and

not only to mourn the death of Husayn" (SK-1). He added that "they laugh at the majority of the Shi'a, they tell them lies, and promise them paradise" (SK-1).

The other key informant noted that the Shi'a religious establishment, Islamist parties, and Shi'a militias use the commemoration of 'Ashura to harass the Sunni (SUK-2). This key informant commented that "for one, you cannot reduce the rich history of Iraq to only what happened to Karbala" adding that "they are clearly placing the *Mathhab* (sect) first" (SUK-2). In addition, "their account of the events of Karbala seems to be skewed and exaggerated" (SUK-2). This key informant explained the ultimate goal for using the commemoration:

> The history tell us that Muslims fought many wars to gain power and control under different religious pretexts, but in reality they used the same slogans which were used by tribes before Islam. Before Islam, and in preparation for war, and in order to evoke emotions among tribe members slogan such as "*Ya la-Tharat fola'n*" ("O, the avengers of 'someone') was used. Today, the name 'Husayn' is used in this slogan to evoke the emotions of the Shi'a and motivate them to fight to establish a Shi'a state in Iraq (SUK-1).

This key informant added:

> Today, the Shi'a religious establishment has used Husayn as a pretext to revive the animosities in Karbala in 680, all those reciters reading elegies to commemorate the killing of Husayn is to stimulate a sense of revenge, all under the pretext of teaching about his noble principles. They used this to attack what they call 'Yazid's camp', the Sunnis, and to ignite destructive war in the region, including Syria and Yemen (SUK-1).

The key informant concluded by noting:

> We will never get out from these spiral sectarian attitudes unless we stop using Husayn's blood to achieve political gain, to allow corrupt and unqualified political parties to assume power. Muslims should overcome the tragedy of Karbala because it has been proven that in failing to do so, their cities, in one way or another, would become like Karbala. That way the commemoration of Karbala symbolises 'pouring oil on a fire'. The only way forward is for Muslims to forget and forgive what happen in Karbala. In short, the Shi'a have to reconsider their slogan "Every land is Karbala and every day is 'Ashura" because they have been in perpetual wars with the rest of Muslims (SUK-1).

Overall, based on the Shi‘a and Sunni key informants’ views, it can be inferred that the mourning rituals, especially *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* have been used strategically by the Shi‘a religious establishment although for two different purposes. On one hand, they have been used to revive Islam; on the other hand, to manipulate Shi‘a masses. After clarifying some of the themes related to rituals’ strength and their strategic use, in the following section I present the views of key informants on some of the issues related to the symbolisms expressed by the commemoration of ‘Ashura.

7.3.3 Symbolic meanings of the rituals

Themes emerged from previous stages indicate that, from the perspectives of Shi‘a participants, ‘Ashura rituals represent the core of Shi‘a identity together with an expression of counter-repression and response to threat, whilst from the perspectives of Sunni participants, the rituals represent ignorance and sectarian attitudes. These themes were discussed with Shi‘a and Sunni key informants.

7.3.3.1 The views of Shi‘a key informants

Shi‘a key informants did not doubt the legitimacy of the commemoration of ‘Ashura, and emphasised the importance of practicing these rituals. For them, this is not a sectarian act, as one key informant argued:

> Husayn does not create or contribute to creating division in society. I do not accept that, because, think about it, who is Husayn? Husayn is the son of Fatima and his father is ‘Ali and those who have doubt about Husayn means that they have doubts about the Prophet himself (SHK-1).

Another Shi‘a key informant recognised that the Shi‘a commemorate ‘Ashura as a counter-repressive measure. This key informant explained:

> The rituals reflect the oppression of the Shi‘a, plain and simple. Historically, the Shi‘a have been oppressed, look at the way we were treated during the regime of Saddam. People go on the street to protest oppression because that what Imam Husayn taught us (SHK-2).

Within the context of what ‘Ashura rituals mean for the Shi‘a, key informants also discussed the years of banning and restriction of the commemoration under the regime of Saddam Hussein. According to one key informant, ‘Ashura rituals represent freedom for the Shi‘a to practice their

rituals after years and years of banning and restriction (SHK-1). This key informant noted that prior to 2003, the Shi‘a identity was unwillingly compromised (SHK-1). Shi‘a key informants argued that before 2003, the Shi‘a were able to maintain their identity, but that it was weakened. One Shi‘a key informant noted that, as an example of this, there were even marriages between the Shi‘a and the Sunni, especially in Baghdad (SHK-3). According to this key informant, Shi‘a identity was weakened but not broken. In this case, the mourning rituals in post-2003 can also signify the boosting of Shi‘a identity. Related to the theme that the rituals are considered as un-Islamic practices, all Shi‘a key informants profusely rejected the views that describe the rituals as un-Islamic practices. A Shi‘a key informant commented that:

> I have heard so many times that some of the rituals are *haram* (un-Islamic), others suggesting that we should not do *tatbir*, we should not do *latum*. The problem is we as Muslims still judge our practices and behaviour on the basis of western norms (SHK-5).

This key informant added that “we should let the Shi‘a commemorate ‘Ashura the way they find it most suitable from their own cultural perspective” (SHK-5). I also clarified with the key informants the view that emerged from the analysis regarding the mourning rituals symbolise loyalty to sect and not to the nation. Based on their views, the concept of nationalism is relatively new whilst Shi‘ism extends back to the period of the Prophet Muhammad. One of them noted, “nationalism and Shi‘ism are incompatible because nationalism is created by the Western imperialist powers to divide Muslim communities” (SHK-1). Another key informant noted, “Islam as a religion is against nationalism because Allah does not categorise people based on race” (SHK-3) adding, “we do not pay attention to this person is an Arab or a Persian or any other nationality. In fact, the mothers of four of our Imams are non-Arab” (SHK-3).

7.3.3.2 <u>The views of Sunni key informants</u>

As emerged in the analysis, observing the commemoration of ‘Ashura places the Shi‘a, as the followers of Husayn, on his side implying they are on the right. The Sunni key informant dismissed this argument noted that:

> Yes, they praise Husayn for fighting injustice, they tell stories about his bravery and modesty, and they claim that they are his followers but the reality is completely different. They do not adhere to these principles nor apply them. The reality that we live in is corrupted and a crime-dominated society. Society is infested with

> negative social issues. If one thing that those rituals symbolise, it is dichotomy (SUK-1).

This key informant added, "what moral or religious superiority? Have you seen the Shi'a in processions? They are mostly ignorant; some of them are covered with mud and others are covered with blood" (SUK-1).

Both key informants downplayed the notion of the Shi'a have been victimised and that the rituals reflect their status as oppressed people. One of them noted that:

> Let me be clear, we are not anti-Husayn; we recognise his status as the beloved grandson of the Prophet. I am personally not against commemorating 'Ashura reasonably but the exaggerated ways by which they commemorate 'Ashura including excessive weeping and flagellation, showing that they have been victimised. I do not see the way they commemorate 'Ashura reflects morality or superiority, I see it as vengeance. By keep reminding people that they have been abused, and their enemies want to obliterate them, is to motive them to revenge. The way they commemorate 'Ashura shows that victimhood is part of their identity, and that they have been abused (SUK-2).

Overall, despite the different views they provided, the key informants increased the understanding of some of the symbolic themes expressed by 'Ashura rituals, and made sense of some complex issues that emerged from the previous stages of data collection. In the following section, key informants' perspectives on the third and final concept of the SRT framework, social outcome, are outlined.

7.3.4 Social outcome

Themes that emerged from previous stages were discussed with Shi'a and Sunni Iraqi key informants. They discussed the two main social outcomes of commemorating 'Ashura, empowering the Shi'a, and division created within Iraqi society. Their views are presented in the following sections.

7.3.4.1 The views of Shi'a key informants

The majority of Shi'a key informants see the commemoration as empowering the religion of Islam and not specifically the Shi'a. One of them noted: "it is true we advocate for the commemoration but for the purpose of protecting Islam by adhering to the teaching of *ahl al-bayt*" (SHK-1). This key informant added that:

> When it comes to protecting Islam, as in the case with the war against ISIS, we look for Imam Husayn for inspiration, motivation, and strength. That is our belief. We sacrifice everything, the way the Imam did in Karbala. Because of this, we were able to defeat ISIS (SHK-1).

Shi‘a key informants also downplayed the concept that the commemoration has contributed to increasing the socio-religious status of the Shi‘a religious establishment and religious leaders. In that regard, a key informant noted that “it is not the rituals, their status comes from their knowledge and moral behaviour. Religious leaders spend a lot of time to accrue knowledge through religious schools in Najaf and Karbala” (SHK-2). Overall, based on their responses, it can be inferred that the commemoration of ‘Ashura empowers Islam and not only the Shi‘a nor the Shi‘a religious establishment.

In terms of the other social outcome of commemorating ‘Ashura, rising sensitivities and creating division between Shi‘a and Sunni Iraqis, most of the key informants acknowledged that, for a variety of different reasons, the majority of the Sunnis are not in favour of the mourning rituals. One Shi‘a key informant accepted that the commemoration of ‘Ashura raises sensitivities between the Shi‘a and the Sunni explaining that:

> Yes, the commemoration can create division but it is not our fault. We commemorate ‘Ashura because we follow the *Sunna* of the Prophet but the Sunni do not follow his practices because if they do, they would have commemorated ‘Ashura. As you know, the Prophet knew about the killing of Husayn in Karbala and mourned his death before it happened. It is in their books (SHK-1).

Another key informant mentioned, “In short answer, yes, the commemoration creates challenges to the Sunni” (SHK-2). This key informant added:

> We know that and we know their complaints in terms of road closures and traffic jams etc. and that is why al-Sistani issued a fatwa allowing Shi‘a to do the *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* within a week’s time. As you know, traditionally, the *ziyara* has to be done on the fortieth day but giving people a week to visit Karbala and to do the *ziyara* will help deal with the traffic issues, closing business etc. (SHK-2).

However, this key informant also mentioned that:

> The Sunni, and not all of them, complain about trivial issues such as heavy traffic, and the chaos that comes with commemorating ‘Ashura because they do not like it,

> because it is a Shi‘a thing. What is the big deal when people pass by their neighbourhoods on their way to Karbala? Is that such a big deal? Those are peaceful people; they are not harming, stealing or damaging anything. We put up a lot with them before 2003. You know how many people Saddam and his security people killed of my family? Sixteen members, they killed. Now, they cannot tolerate us mourning one of the horrific tragedies the world witnessed (SHK-2).

Furthermore, the following theme was presented to key informants for comments: On some occasions, the Sunni are cursed and accused of being ISIS supporters, and the fight against ISIS is portrayed by some members of *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi* and Shi‘a militias as the fight against the descendants of those who killed Husayn. When asked about their opinions, the majority of Shi‘a key informants responded by noting that the people who killed Husayn were not Sunnis. A Shi‘a key informant mentioned: “those who killed Imam Husayn were murderers. We only curse those who are responsible for the killing and abusing the Imams and *ahl al-bayt*” (SHK-3). Similarly, the notion that *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi* is using ‘Ashura rituals or any other practices to intimidate the Sunni was rejected by the majority of Shi‘a key informants. A key informant argued, “on the contrary, *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi* redignified Sunni communities after ISIS humiliated them” (SHK-3). Other key informant responded by elaborating on the background of members of *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi*:

> Members of *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi* who were fighting a vicious enemy were mostly young Shi‘a men, unprivileged, and uneducated. Those young men came from families with strong allegiance to the *marja‘iyya*. They were driven by the idea that there was an attack on their beliefs and symbols. They fought very hard with very little. That generation grow up observing the mourning rituals especially during the sectarian tension in 2006 and 2007. They do not really know the other side, the Sunni, because they had no to little interaction with them. They heard frightening stories about them and the way they hate the Shi‘a. Against this background, their behaviours can be explained (SHK-3).

Two points can be inferred from this latter key informant response: first, that the mourning rituals are fundamental part of the culture and beliefs of *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi*, which means they will not give it up when they are in Sunni dominated communities; and second, that there is a lack of knowledge about the Sunnis. This key informant added:

> The majority of the Sunnis did not know either who are those people. People in Ramadi [an overwhelmingly Sunni-majority city] did not trust *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi*

> because they did not know them. You always second-guess people that you do not know. In addition, very similar to the frightening stories the Shi‘a heard about the Sunnis, the Sunnis too, heard that the Shi‘a, *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi*, came to kill them (SHK-3).

This key informant also found it relevant to the discussion of the *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi* to emphasise the exaggerated and misinformation about the threat from both the Shi‘a and the Sunni, by sharing a personal experience:

> After the liberation of al-Anbar province, members of *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi* took an elder individual from there to a hospital in Baghdad for a medical treatment. The doctor that treated this elder person was referred to as a Sayyid. At the end of the visit, this elder person thanked the doctor and asked him whether he is a Sayyid. The doctor said yes. The elder person replied, you are a Sayyid and you are nice to me? Apparently, this Sunni person was worried that the doctor would refuse to treat him or even mistreat him given that he was a Sayyid (SHK-3).

Within the notion of exaggerated threat and misinformation in challenging times, this key informant also noted:

> The Shi‘a Iraqis are often accused of being loyal to Iran. It is also inaccurate to assume that they get along with Iranians. Based on my experience, it is true that a lot Iranians visit Karbala especially and Iraqis welcome them especially during *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*, but this does not mean that they get along, this is part of Iraqi tradition. In addition, because they do not speak same language, they do not attend same memorial services. Iranians have their own processions. It is only a few percentage of Shi‘a Iraqis that can be categorised as well-connected to Iranians (SHK-3).

Another theme was discussed with key informants is the lack of protest during the commemoration of ‘Ashura after 2003. This theme was put forward to key informants to better understand the ritual symbolism, and presented to them in this way:

> Many Shi‘a and Sunni participants expressed extreme frustration with the status quo. In the meantime, whilst millions of Shi‘a Iraqis gather every year to commemorate ‘Ashura, they seem too complacent to use the rituals to challenge the status quo the way it was done before 2003. They seemed adamant then to challenge the Ba‘ath Party authority during the ‘Ashura rituals, and to vent their grievances and frustration with the government. However, and despite their frustration with the Shi‘a dominated governments, there has been no protest after 2003.

One Shi‘a key informant commented that “ISIS poses a real threat to the Shi‘a. It is true that the Shi‘a are in power, but perhaps for the first time in history, the Shi‘a are being targeted more than Jewish people by Sunni Muslims” (SHK-2). What this key informant was trying to explain was the dilemma for the Shi‘a, because even though they are not satisfied with the government, the alternative is much worse. The alternative here is to have ISIS or any similar anti-Shi‘a government that would oppress the Shi‘a and prevent them from commemorating ‘Ashura, similar to the Sunni-dominated government before 2003 (SHK-2).

Based on the views provided by two key informants, the Shi‘a masses’ dissatisfaction with their government started to have an impact on the rituals themselves. Both key informants recognised that some Shi‘a started to resent the commemoration because they saw the rituals as associated with Shi‘a Islamist political parties, the government, and the Shi‘a religious establishment. I took this opportunity to discuss with them one of the findings of the previous stage regarding 20-30% of Shi‘a participants in the interview and the survey reported that they do not observe the rituals. One of them noted that the Shi‘a religious establishment is aware of this trend- some Shi‘a Iraqis are turning their backs on the mourning rituals (SHK-3). The key informant explained:

> It is not necessarily something to do with their belief or the nature of the mourning rituals but it is mostly has something to do their negative views about the government and Shi‘a religious establishment. When you are against your government, you protest by doing the opposite of what they want you to do. Some people started to resent the mourning rituals to spite the government and the Shi‘a religious establishment. Actually, the same happened before 2003, people became more religious to spite the secular regime of Saddam Hussein. They became more enthusiastic about observing ‘Ashura rituals because they knew that Saddam was against these practices. There is a saying now, Iraqis were religious under the secular rule of the Ba‘ath Party, and secular under the rule of Shi‘a Islamist parties (SHK-3).

This key informant, however, wanted to emphasise that a general sense of resentment against ‘Ashura rituals manifested primarily after the defeat of ISIS. He argued that:

> It is easy to forget the situation when ISIS was advancing and threating to take over almost all Iraqi cities. At that time, people (Shi‘a and Sunni) were occupied with saving themselves, family members, and their cities from ISIS terror. They were in survivor mode, paying less attention to all other issues. However, with the defeat of ISIS, people turned their anger to the government, the religious establishment

> including Shi‘a religious leaders and even *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi* accusing them of corruption, mismanagement of resources, and hypocrisy. The point that I am trying to underscore here is that resentment against religious views in general and ‘Ashura rituals in particular mainly surfaced after the downfall of ISIS (SHK-3).

Another key informant rejected the parallels between corruption and the commemoration of ‘Ashura, seeing them as two different things and commented: “it is reductionist to view the relations between these two notions as cause and effect” (SHK-5). This key informant questioned, “why are the Shi‘a and the Shi‘a religious establishment responsible for corruption?” (SHK-5).

Within the context of negative practices, Shi‘a key informants emphasised that the Shi‘a religious establishment are very serious about educating people about the importance of commemorating ‘Ashura, and especially about observing *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* in accordance with Islamic values. A Shi‘a key informant mentioned that the majority of *mujtahids*, including Sayyid al-Sistani and even the populist religious leader Muqtada al-Sadr, have guidelines for observing the *ziyara* on their websites and are open to answer questions or concerns posted there (SHK-5).

Based on the interviews conducted with Shi‘a key informants, there is an obvious sense of frustration emerging from the sufferings experienced by Shi’a communities before 2003. All of them mentioned that the previous regime killed a number of their family members. During the interview with one of these leaders, and whilst discussing the Sunni point of view of the commemoration, he mentioned that “we put up with a lot, and it is our right to commemorate ‘Ashura, and they should do it, too” (SHK-3).

7.3.4.2 <u>The views of Sunni key informants</u>

Both Sunni key informants noted that commemorating ‘Ashura has negative consequences on Shi‘a-Sunni relations. One of them sees the problem of the rituals as being related to the way the Shi‘a commemorate ‘Ashura, particularly after 2003 (SUK-1). This key informant emphasised that Shi‘a and Sunni can together relate to commemorating the martyrdom of Husayn, but that some of the rituals are inappropriate: “they do not abide by Iraqi tradition or custom, some of them are over exaggerated, and some in fact reflect hatred and hostility” (SUK-1). I asked whether this view could safely and reasonably represent the wider view of Sunni Iraqis. This key informant added that “although I cannot speak for all Iraqis, I think many can relate and share what I have told you earlier” adding that “yes, the commemoration could create some issues but there are bigger and

far worse issues in Iraq that divide us" (SUK-1). When I asked to name some of these issues, the reply was "lots of issues, there is corruption, no services, and terrorism". The key informant concluded by noting: "the rituals are not aimed at uniting Iraqis, it is an attempt to impose certain viewpoints on all Iraqis. In a very provocative way, the rituals work towards overemphasising Shi'ism in Iraq" (SUK-1). The other key informant noted that "there is sense of resentment towards 'Ashura rituals because they represent sectarian attitudes, ignorance, and the dominance of the Shi'a religious establishment" (SUK-2).

Sunni key informants also commented on the theme that commemorating 'Ashura empowers the Shi'a. Both key informants did not see the commemoration as empowering the Shi'a. On this point, it seems that Sunni key informants agree that ISIS has done a favour to the Shi'a by uniting them and providing a means to attack and supress the Sunnis. One of the key informant explained, "it is not empowering the Shi'a as much as supressing other religious and cultural views in Iraqi society" (SUK-2). In their attempts to discuss the lack of protest against the government, both Sunni key informants downplayed and even dismissed the significance of 'Ashura rituals, one of them described the rituals' participants as "ignorant" and "misguided" (SUK-2). This key informant did not expect any form of meaningful protest during the commemoration because the government and the militias support the rituals (SUK-2).

In summary, conducting interviews with Shi'a and Sunni key informants was an important step for conducting the final analysis of themes emerged from previous stages because the interviews clarified and contextualised many concepts emerged from the previous stages of data analysis.

7.4 Final findings

As described in Chapter Five, the final round of data analysis was conducted by examining relationships, similarities and differences between themes that emerged from the three stages of data analysis. In line with the theoretical approach adopted in this thesis, the final findings of this thesis are presented in four categories: the strength of 'Ashura rituals, their strategic use, symbolic meanings of rituals, and social outcomes. Overall, the arguments presented in the final findings are identified and discussed in content analysis, observation, and interviews and summarised in Figure 65.

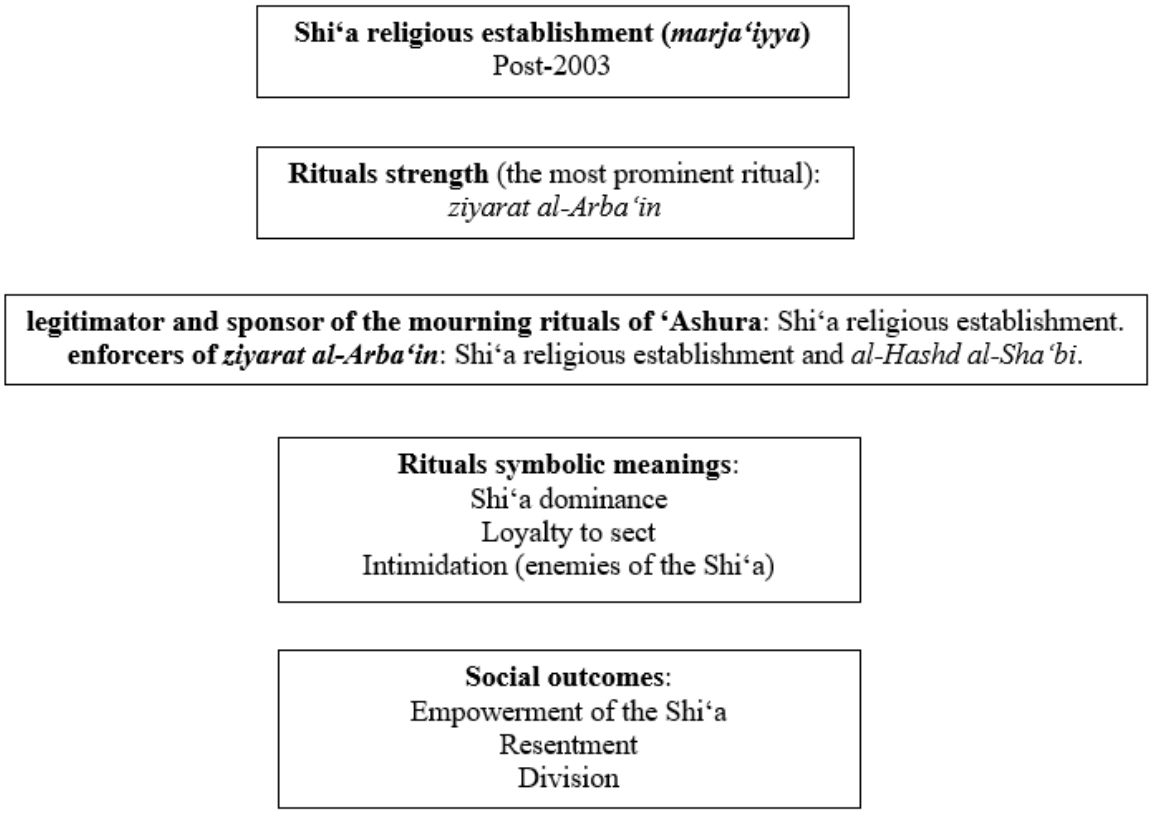


Figure 65 *Final findings: applying the SRT framework to ‘Ashura rituals (Author’s own elaboration).*

7.4.1 Ritual strength

‘Ashura rituals collectively are dominant. In particular, the analysis of the three stages indicates that *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* is the most powerful and visible form of the mourning rituals. What can be more visible than millions of women and men wearing black clothing, carrying flags and banners, walking to Karbala from all directions? In addition, as the findings show, significant time is dedicated to *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*. People start their journey to Karbala as early as the beginning of Safar so that they can be in Karbala on the 20th of Safar. The preparation and the organisation of *mawakib* especially *mawakib* Al-Khidmah start almost five months in advance of the day of the fortieth. In Karbala, thousands of varied processions take place around *al-Arba‘in* including mourning, *latum*, *zangeel*, and *al-Khidmah*. The ritualised practices involved in *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* generally express similar meanings, but some variation exists in their forms. This thesis also finds that there is unequivocally no shortage of resources whether in terms of money allocated nor

human resources such as volunteers. It is the only ritual where millions of Shi‘a Iraqis and from abroad gather in one place, Karbala.

7.4.2 Strategic use

Themes emerged from the three stages of data analysis showing that the Shi‘a religious establishment acts as legitimator, ritual sponsor, and ritual enforcer of the mourning rituals of ‘Ashura, with a specific interest in *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*. The strategic use of rituals by the *marja‘iyya* and the focus on the episode of Karbala serve to enhance the Shi‘a identity of the Shi‘a of Iraq because it was weakened given that the political order of pre-2003 was suspicious of Shi‘a clerics and Shi‘a Iraqis. Another way to understand the heavy endorsement of *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* by Shi‘a clerical authority is as an attempt or an opportunity for them to reconnect with their base: the Shi‘a masses. According to a key informant, this is perhaps the only channel of communication between the Shi‘a religious authority and the Shi‘a masses because, within the religious realm, sports, arts, or any other popular aspects are broadly regarded as undesirable. In addition to the Shi‘a religious establishment, *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi* which was created by a *fatwa* from al-Sistani, is also identified as ritual enforcer for its role in promoting, sponsoring, funding, and securing *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* to motivate its members and to intimidate the enemies of the Shi‘a, especially ISIS.

7.4.3 Symbolic meanings of ‘Ashura rituals

The comparison of the findings from the different phases of analysis indicates that ‘Ashura rituals symbolically express three major themes: Shi‘a dominance, loyalty to sect, and intimidation. These symbolic themes are evident in all the ritualised practices, but especially so in *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*.

7.4.3.1 Shi‘a dominance

The dominance of the Shi‘a is one of the major symbolic meanings expressed by the mourning rituals of ‘Ashura, especially *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*. The dominance of the Shi‘a derives from their rituals being loud and visible and from the lack of any other religious or cultural activities that contradict or counter balance the mourning culture during the commemoration of ‘Ashura. In other words, the analysis shows that strong Shi‘a identity positively correlates with the strength of rituals. Also, a successful and powerful *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*, with millions of participants, represents the dominance of the Shi‘a religious establishment for its role in authorising, promoting, and enforcing the ritual. Similarly, a successful and powerful *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* projects the power of

al-Hashd al-Sha'bi, which does not only aim at defeating ISIS in Iraq militarily but also aspires to defeat their ideology which centred on eradicating the Shi'a. Therefore, *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* promotes and enforces *ziyarat al-Arba'in* to show Shi'a solidarity and power. Overall, as shown in the analysis, the rituals are the voice of the Shi'a: when the Shi'a wear black, cry and weep loudly in public, and engage in self-flagellation, they want to be heard and acknowledged, creating a dominant voice to silence all others.

7.4.3.2 Loyalty to sect

When discussing the symbolic meanings of the 'Ashura rituals, the commemoration of 'Ashura comes to symbolise loyalty to sect. This is because the rituals put Shi'a beliefs and traditions at the fore, and the Shi'a religious establishment become more relevant than at any other time. By recalling the tragedy of Karbala, the Shi'a affirm that they are loyal to their beliefs and unwilling to compromise. In addition, the mourning rituals of 'Ashura, especially *ziyarat al-Arba'in* circumvent national identity. As shown in the analysis, during *ziyarat al-Arba'in*, 'Ashura flags, *Husseinite* images, and portraits of the *marja'iyya* are dominant in comparison to the representation of national identity such as Iraqi flag. '*Lebayk Ya Husayn'* (Husayn, we are at your service) uttered often during the commemoration is another indication of loyalty to the sect. Loyalty to sect, as opposed to the nation, is also communicated through the gathering of millions of Shi'a individuals in Karbala, irrespective of their nationalities.

7.4.3.3 Intimidates the enemies of the Shi'a

One of the main confirmed themes through the three stages of data analysis is that the commemoration of 'Ashura, especially *ziyarat al-Arba'in* intimidate those who have issues with public expression of Shi'a identity. This theme is manifested in various ways. For example, 'Ashura rituals allow the Shi'a to impose their viewpoint and their interpretation of historical events without accepting or tolerating any opposing views. During *ziyarat al-Arba'in,* on their way to Karbala, the Shi'a march through Sunni neighbourhoods and cities at their own terms. The prohibition of any cultural, social event that contradicts the mourning environment during the commemoration is seen as a form of intimidation. The analysis shows that the attack on Sunni symbols is also regarded as a form of intimidation. As recounted by Sunni participants in this thesis, under the pretext of securing the roads for walkers to Karbala, members of *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* intimidate Sunni individuals, which is regarded as a form of intimidation. The widely used

revenge slogan, '*Ya la-Tharat* al-Husayn' (Oh, the avengers of Husayn) during the commemoration also represents a form of intimidation. Shi'a unity, especially between Iran and Iraq, resulted from observing *ziyarat al-Arba'in* emphasised by Shi'a religious establishment in Iran also meant to intimidate the enemies of the Shi'a.

7.4.4 Social outcomes

I have argued that the fall of the Ba'ath regime in 2003 provided the Shi'a with the opportunity to openly practice their rituals after a long time of banning and restricting. I have also argued that generally, for the majority of the Sunnis, the mourning rituals do not make sense on religious and cultural grounds. The fact that the Shi'a religious establishment used the rituals strategically after 2003 to further their political and religious influence and to enhance the Shi'a identity in Iraq further implicated the Sunni. Not surprisingly, Shi'a gatherings, whether in processions or outdoor cooking for charity, became an irresistible target for Sunni extremist groups. The notion of being under attack further motivated the Shi'a to commemorate 'Ashura, as the analysis shows, especially in Karbala for *ziyarat al-Arba'in*. Under the umbrella of the Shi'a religious establishment, *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* capitalised on the Shi'a masses reaction to threat and took charge of providing security during the commemoration of 'Ashura and especially, for those who travel to Karbala for *ziyarat al-Arba'in*. The data analysis also indicated that *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* used the mourning rituals strategically to motivate its members in their fights against terrorist groups including ISIS. In light of ISIS defeat, as shown in Figure 65, there is evidence to indicate that 'Ashura rituals and the themes expressed by them, especially *ziyarat al-Arba'in*, then lead to several distinct outcomes: the empowerment of the Shi'a, resentment in both communities regarding 'Ashura rituals and religious views, and division between the Shi'a and the Sunnis.

7.4.4.1 Shi'a empowerment (dominance)

One of the main social outcomes of commemorating 'Ashura is the rise in Shi'a power. Here, power is not manifested in sophisticated military forces, or weaponry, rather it is a power generated from collective emotions and unity that transcend national identity. In addition, the unity created from observing the rituals intimidate the enemies of the Shi'a, ISIS in particular. Many Shi'a individuals, whether I met them in Karbala or during the interviews, expressed a sense of victory when reflecting on *ziyarat al-Arba'in*. One female Shi'a participant residing in Iraq noted that "unfortunately, I have not being able to do the *ziyara*, and walk to Karbala but when I see them on

television, I see a victory for the Shi‘a from Allah” (SH-14). Furthermore, successful *ziyara,* which manifests in massive number of participants in the rituals, strengthen the status of the Shi‘a religious establishment and *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi,* therefore contributing to their dominance. Finally, *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* seems to indirectly strengthen the position of Shi‘a dominated government, given that, as shown, in data analysis of previous stages, *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* does not symbolise political activism against the government.

7.4.4.2 Resentment against religious practices and views

There is a sense of resentment about the commemoration of ‘Ashura emerging among both Shi‘a and Sunni Iraqis. My research identified many reasons for this trend, including that the rituals have come to represent a dysfunctional state, that some of the narratives adopted are comprised of myth, that the importance of the rituals is over-emphasised, that the rituals symbolise foreign-Iranian influence, and that these rituals are regarded as a form of religious intimidation. Another reason for resenting the rituals is related to the confusing dichotomy of ‘idealism’ versus ‘realism’: many Iraqis are wondering, what is the point of preaching idealistic views through the commemoration when they are not materialised on the ground. Overall, an emerging sense of resentment against the rituals was evident in the three stages of data analysis. At the same time, the data analysis also shows there are some very loyal Shi‘a Iraqis who believe that the commemoration of ‘Ashura is a fundamental aspect of their religious belief.

7.4.4.3 Division

Findings from this research study suggest that the commemoration of ‘Ashura creates division between the Shi‘a and the Sunni because the rituals separate the Shi‘a from others, and emphasise Shi‘a identity whilst supressing a more inclusive Iraqi identity. ‘Ashura rituals can be seen as divisive practices given that the rituals imply loyalty to the sect rather than to the nation. The rituals have negatively affected Shi‘a-Sunni relations in Iraq, mainly because the mourning rituals have been used strategically by powerful Shi‘a groups to intimidate and alienate Sunni communities.

In summary, findings from this research study indicate the Shi‘a religious establishment strategically used *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* to spread their influence and to inculcate Shi‘a symbols into Iraqi national identity. The mourning rituals have also used strategically by *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi* to

unite the Shi‘a and to intimidate their enemies, including ISIS. Furthermore, the analysis of the data suggests that the rituals contribute to raising sensitivities between Shi‘a and Sunni Iraqis.

7.5 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, the findings of stage two and three of data analysis were presented. After that, I discussed the final findings, which are based on themes identified in the three stages of data analysis collected from content analysis, observation, survey, and interviews. Overall, it can be concluded that ‘Ashura rituals, especially *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* are powerful, visible, and dominant, and that they have been used strategically by the Shi‘a religious establishment, and *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi*. The mourning rituals of ‘Ashura expressed a range of symbolic meanings: Shi‘a dominance, loyalty to sect, and intimidation. In terms of the social outcome of commemorating ‘Ashura, whilst the rituals contributed to the empowerment of the Shi‘a, they also contributed to creating division between the Shi‘a and the Sunni. In addition, the analysis of the data shows that there is a sense of resentment emerging among both Shi‘a and Sunni Iraqis against the commemoration of ‘Ashura. In the following chapter, a contextualisation of the findings and the main contribution of this thesis to the field of study is presented.

8 Detailed discussion and main contribution to the field of study

In this chapter, the findings of this thesis as presented in Chapter Six and Seven are discussed within the context of the adopted theoretical framework. In addition, this chapter discusses the thesis contribution to the field of study. Furthermore, potential further research and the challenges associated with conducting this research are outlined. Finally, limitations to the research are discussed.

8.1 Detailed discussion of the findings

Based on the theoretical framework adopted, this research focused on the ways the Shi'a religious establishment used the most visible form of the commemoration of 'Ashura, *ziyarat al-Arba'in*, in a calculated and deliberate manner, to further their influence in Iraq. The findings show that *ziyarat al-Arba'in* is regarded as the most visible, appropriate, and dominant element of the mourning rituals to commemorate the tragedy of Karbala. The prominence of *ziyarat al-Arba'in*, especially the *mashaya*, is in line with the findings of Edwards and Knottnerus (2010) when they examined the impact of the ritualised practices of the Orange Order on Northern Ireland society. They stated that processions organised by the Orange Order are the most visible form of ritualised practiced commemorating the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. This finding is also in line with the relevant literature regarding processions, which are considered to be the most visible and effective form of protest (Kertzer, 1988; Saint-Blancat and Cancellieri, 2014).

However, *ziyarat al-Arba'in* has not always been as visible and dominant. Under the rule of Saddam Hussein, as discussed in the related literature, the mourning rituals in general and *ziyarat al-Arba'in* in particular were under tight control. The findings of this thesis can provide some clarification for the regime's restrictive policies, which is based on the two theoretical elements of SRT, strategic use of rituals and symbolic meanings expressed by the mourning rituals. First, given the authoritarian nature of regime, it would not have tolerated any practices that did not symbolise allegiance to the regime because, as shown in the analysis, the mourning rituals symbolise loyalty to sect, to Imam Husayn and *ahl al-bayt*, and not to the regime or the state. Secondly, the restricted polices can be explained based on the element of the strategic use of the rituals because, as the findings show, 'Ashura rituals, especially *ziyarat al-Arba'in*, can be used strategically to benefit entities and groups other than the state. As shown in the analysis, the Shi'a religious establishment,

Shi‘a Islamists parties, *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi*, and even the Iranian regime, have used the mourning rituals to further their own interest in Iraq. The finding is a testament to the argument put forward by SRT, which does not regard rituals as mundane acts, neither does it dismiss them as irrelevant or irrational; rather it considers them as crucial human behaviours saturated with symbolism that have consequences and impact (Knottnerus, 2012).

The findings of this thesis, which show that it was not until 2003 that the mourning rituals, especially *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* became powerful, fits within the SRT main argument of ritual strength. For rituals to be effective and powerful, as argued by Knottnerus (2012), they need to be visible, repetitive, well-funded, and strategically used, all of which were denied before 2003. Within the thermotical concept of ritual strength, especially the element of visibility, the findings show that numbers of participants in *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* were extremely important. To motivate the Shi‘a masses to participate in the rituals, the findings show that the Shi‘a religious establishment placed great emphases on rewards (intercession) for observing *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*. Intercession, which constitutes a core element in Shi‘a ideology, is recognised and discussed in the related literature (al-Wardi, 1969). Furthermore, as this thesis shows, people are not pre-conditioned to be rewarded. Anyone can collect rewards as long as they express grief for Imam Husayn. The term pre-conditioned here means that individuals do not have to be members of a religious organisation or even devout Muslims. This finding is also in line with what has already been discussed in the related literature in that the focus and emphasis is always on practising the rituals and not on the underlying beliefs, because those beliefs are privately held and, in some sense, unknowable (Kertzer, 1988). Essentially, the Shi‘a religious establishment is more interested in numbers than the quality of the participants, which in turn explains why the rituals do not symbolise religious superiority.

Moving the discussion to the second theoretical concept of SRT, the strategic use of rituals, as the findings suggest, the Shi‘a religious establishment acts as legitimator, ritual sponsor, and ritual enforcer of the mourning rituals of ‘Ashura, with a specific interest in *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*. However, to compare this finding with what has been discussed in the literature review in Chapter Four, with the exception of al-Wardi (1969), Nakash (1994, 1993), Pierre, Hutchinson and Abdulrazak (2007), not many scholars have explicitly acknowledged the role of the Shi‘a religious establishment in using the commemoration of Ashura strategically.

In comparison to their roles as ritual legitimator and sponsor, the analysis shows that the Shi‘a religious establishment role as ritual enforcer of *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* is more emphasised. As discussed in the literature review, although weakened, Shi‘a clerical authority remained among the few autonomous actors who survived the Ba‘ath rule without fully losing their social capital. This is because the growing religiosity in Iraq in the 1990s and because the clerical authorities were viewed by the Shi‘a as an opposition to the regime of Saddam Hussein (al-Qarawee, 2018). Since 2003, the Shi‘a religious establishment has emerged as a powerful and influential entity headed by the Grand *marja‘* ‘Ali al-Sistani, to whom all Shi‘a political parties, Shi‘a militias, *mujtahids* and religious leaders look for advice and guidance. In order to compete in the political, social, religious order of post-2003, the Shi‘a religious authority needed to assert Shi‘a identity. In that regard, two major challenges faced the Shi‘a religious establishment: weakened Shi‘a traditions and rituals due to decades of negligence and suppression; and the threat from the Sunni-affiliated groups, especially ISIS. The findings show that the Shi‘a clerical authority used the commemoration of ‘Ashura strategically, especially *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*, to address these challenges.

It is quite apparent based on interviews, fieldwork, and content analysis of the mourning rituals that various components of *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* best qualify them to support the promotion of a collective representation of Shi‘a identity. They are peaceful and serve to bring Shi‘a Iraqis closer together, especially the rituals of walking to Karbala form different communities, cooking and generously serving traditional food along the way, carrying ‘Ashura flags and the proliferation of *Husseinite* images. Furthermore, a crucial part of *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*, as the analysis shows, is emotion. As the findings indicate, there is an emphasis on evoking the emotions of the Shi‘a by stressing the suffering and the humiliation of Husayn and his camp at Karbala. *Ziyarat al-Arba‘in*, as discussed in the analysis, gives voice to the humiliated, focusing on Zainab’s terrifying accounts of what happened in Karbala whilst showing bravery and resilience. Emotions in rituals have been discussed in the related literature and are also emphasised by SRT. What is pertinent to the findings of this thesis is to draw on the argument that the efficacy of the rituals depends on the emotions they generate. The emotions generated from rituals make ritual participants collectively appear more powerful, united and visible (Collins, 2004). Overall, the Shi‘a religious establishment has succeeded in strengthening Shi‘a identity but in detriment of Sunni identity.

In terms of the other challenge that the Shi‘a religious establishment faced, ISIS posed a real threat to the Shi‘a in general and the Shi‘a religious establishment in particular. In 2014, ISIS occupied of almost third of Iraqi territory, including Sunni dominated provinces, and threatened to eliminate the Shi‘a in Iraq and annihilate their shrine cities (Haddad, 2011). As shown in the analysis, this motivated many Shi‘a to observe the mourning rituals and inspired many more to walk to Karbala for *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*. What motivated the Shi‘a masses to march to Karbala in unprecedented numbers can be explained primarily based on the cultural element of *al-asabiya*. As noted earlier, the concept of *al-asabiya* means that an insult or an attack on a member of the group is an insult or an attack on all members; a tribal approach to survival.

To counter the ISIS threat, the Shi‘a religious establishment used the narrative of Karbala along with mourning rituals to mobilise the Shi‘a masses against the threat of ISIS and especially promoted *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* to show Shi‘a solidarity. Based on historic events discussed in the related literature, it is inevitable for the Shi‘a religious establishment to use the narrative of Karbala strategically in its struggle, but their specific interest in promoting *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* is relatively novel. There is no indication in the related literature whether pre-1921 or between 1921 and 2003, that *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* was the most visible form of the mourning rituals. In fact, the significance of *ziyara* after 2003 has even overshadowed the annual *hajj* rituals, one of the main pillars of Islam, and an obligatory practice for all Muslims (Abbas, 2017, p. 5). This is an unexpected changing pattern given that, traditionally, Mecca has been seen as the most sacred place for Muslims. Mecca is the burial place of Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam (Nakash, 1994), and it is mandatory for Muslims, Shi‘a and Sunni, to face Mecca when praying. Furthermore, as a religious duty, all Muslims should visit Mecca at least once in their lifetime: this is the ritual of *hajj*. In contrast, Karbala is not even mentioned in the Quran. Despite the prominence of Mecca, in 2016, it is estimated that over 20 million Shi‘a Muslims practised the rituals of *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* in Karbala, in comparison to two million Muslims (including Shi‘a and Sunni) who performed the *hajj* rituals in Mecca (Abbas, 2017, p.5).

As the findings indicate, in addition to the Shi‘a religious establishment, *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi* which was created by a *fatwa* from al-Sistani, is also identified as ritual enforcer for its role in promoting, sponsoring, funding, and securing *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*. *Al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi* used the rituals to motivate its members and to intimidate ISIS, the enemy of the Shi‘a. The analysis shows that, by

commemorating ‘Ashura, members of *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi* demonstrate that they are loyal to their Imam, placing themselves on his side. This, however, as seen in the analysis is perceived as a sect-focused symbolic meaning rather than a more inclusive symbolism such as loyalty to the nation.

In addition, the analysis also shows that, similar to the Shi‘a religious establishment, numbers of participants in *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* were crucial for *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi*. This was evident in its heavily involvement to ensure the success of *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*, from providing security to transportation and medical services, because a huge turnout for *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* shows Shi‘a solidarity and power to intimidate ISIS. According to the SRT, ritual enforcers are strategic because they choose the most effective form of rituals to influence with the intention of restructuring society (Knottnerus, 2012, p. 79). Overall, the strategic use of the mourning rituals empowered the Shi‘a rituals establishment and *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi* in their fight against ISIS. Suffice it to say that, as noted in the analysis, the Media Directorate of Al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi, plainly asserted, “‘Ashura …is our secret to victory”. The finding that states *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* the most powerful and visible form of the mourning rituals and used strategically by the influential Shi‘a religious establishment post-2003 agrees with the relations between power and rituals emphasised by SRT. As discussed in Chapter Three, SRT sees rituals predominantly as a form of domination, intimidation, and control exerted by powerful groups rather than as a form of resistance performed by less favoured groups.

The analysis also shows that *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*, by its inhibited nature regarding the post-2003 political order, worked in favour of the Shi‘a-dominated governments. Although the majority of the Shi‘a are not satisfied with the state or with the government’s performance, the threat from ISIS outweighed the challenges of corruption, lack of services, and unemployment. Thus, *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* did not symbolise political activism against the government, especially when the Shi‘a-dominated governments supported and sponsored the commemoration in contrast to governments before 2003. The rituals posing no threat to the Shi‘a-dominated government, compounded by the notion that the rituals accredited to the victory over ISIS, resulted in the empowerment of Shi‘a identity, the Shi‘a religious establishment, Shi‘a-dominated governments, and Shi‘a factions of *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi*. However, as the analysis suggests, the strategic use of the rituals has further alienated the Sunni by linking them to the murderers of Husayn, by insulting historical figures they respect and intimidating them by imposing the culture of mourning on them.

The Shi‘a empowerment that resulted from using the mourning rituals strategically is similar to the findings of a study conducted by Jennifer Edwards and David Knottnerus (2010) using SRT to examine the impact of the ritualised practices of the Orange Order on Protestant-Catholic dynamics. In these societies, where sectarian attitudes are prevalent, the power of Shi‘a and Protestant identity is manifested by being free to march in the way it chooses. Like the Protestants of Northern Ireland, the Shi‘a of Iraq have clearly stated that they will not be told when and where they can march, symbolising Shi‘a domination over the Sunni. In addition, the finding of the strategic use of the mourning rituals resulted in Shi‘a empowerment adds nuances to Haddad’s (2016) major argument of Shi‘a-centric state building, because whilst Haddad recognises that Shi‘a-centric state building involves the empowerment of Shi‘a identity, Haddad falls short of recognising the role of the Shi‘a religious establishment in achieving this outcome.

In addition to empowering the Shi‘a, the findings show that ‘Ashura rituals create division between the Shi‘a and the Sunni. The reasons are discussed throughout the analysis: the rituals separate the Shi‘a from others because it symbolises their loyalty to their sect, and emphasises Shi‘a identity whilst supressing a more inclusive Iraqi identity. This finding is supported by the existing literature where many scholars including Haddad (2016, 2011), Nakash (2005), Nasr, (2016), and Pierre, Hutchinson and Abdulrazak (2007) recognise that the commemoration of Ashura is typically not an occasion for Shi‘a-Sunni harmony.

Furthermore, some Shi‘as and Sunnis started to resent the rituals. For them, the rituals have come to represent a dysfunctional state influenced by Iran. Moreover, the rituals are over-exaggerated practices, based on myth, and that these rituals are perceived by the Sunnis as a form of intimidation. However, an overall sense of resentment emerged from the analysis, on the one hand, and yet millions of Iraqis observe the mourning rituals, on the other hand requires some explanation. Drawing on al-Wardi’s (1969) cultural theories, the dichotomy of idealism and realism, as a feature of Iraqi society, is relevant in this context. Iraqis tend to publicly advocate for idealistic views, expressed in this particular context by the mourning rituals, of rising against tyrants, fighting injustice and corruption. In sharp contrast to these idealistic views, the reality of Iraqi society is manifested in corruption, lack of services and terrorism. This dichotomy of idealistic views promoted by the mourning rituals versus the grim reality is in fact creating resentment towards the rituals.

These social outcomes of resentment and division are similar to the social outcomes of the Orange Order's ritualised practices. In that regard, to understand the social outcomes in both societies, Iraq and Northern Ireland, it is crucial here to underscore the comments of Knottnerus (2012) concerning the Orange Order. Knottnerus (2012, p. 93) argues that "ritualised practices such as these that occur several thousands times each year have contributed to its being a dominant force in this society and a key player in what seemed to be an irreconcilable conflict between Protestants and Catholics". Knottnerus's argument is very relevant in that the commemoration of 'Ashura coming to the fore is equally important in the irreconcilable views of the Shi'a and the Sunni on the battle of Karbala. Perhaps, similar to the Catholics in Northern Ireland, even though the mourning rituals have been practiced for generations, it is highly unlikely for Sunni Iraqis to accept the rituals as long as they symbolise sect-specific interests.

The social outcomes of Ashura rituals should not be restricted to the national level, particularly in light of the proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. As noted by Pierre, Hutchinson and Abdulrazak (2007) there is fear of the Iranian expansionist ideology advocated during the Iranian revolution. This thesis finds that there is a clear indication that the Iranian regime, represented by the supreme leader 'Ali Khamenei, has attempted to use *ziyarat al-Arba'in* to emphasis unity among the Shi'a, especially between Iraq and Iran, but also to intimidate the enemies of the Shi'a.

Drawing on the argument made by Knottnerus (2012, p. 4), in which the SRT in no way denies the validity or significance of the impact of other social factors on social relations, this thesis acknowledges the impact of other factors in shaping Shi'a-Sunni relations such as the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Yet, it also recognises that, by exploring the impact of 'Ashura rituals on Shi'a-Sunni relations, it has provided a missing link in sociological research and analysis of Shi'a-Sunni dynamics. This research attempted to break a taboo by critically analysing the impact of 'Ashura rituals on Shi'a-Sunni relations, arguing that in an indirect culture such as Iraq, when the public discourse always reads 'we are all brothers', the best way to understand Shi'a-Sunni dynamics is through the mourning rituals of 'Ashura. This is mainly because humans tend to use the ambiguous symbolism of rituals for complex communication. Metaphorically, the rituals have served as a barometer for the threat level against the Shi'a identity and for the intimidation of the Sunnis.

In summary, whilst Nakash (1993) argues that "no other single event in Islamic history has played so central a role in shaping Shi'a identity and communal sense as the martyrdom of Husayn and

his companions at Karbala" (p. 161), this thesis contends that no other single event has shaped Shi'a-Sunni relations as much as the mourning rituals of 'Ashura. No matter who holds power, the commemoration of 'Ashura impacts Shi'a-Sunni relations, but as argued in this thesis, the impact increases when the Shi'a are in power.

Overall, as noted in the findings of this thesis, the mourning rituals were not among the main and direct reasons for the fall of the Saddam regime in 2003, nor were they regarded as one of the triggers of the civil war (2006-2007). However, this thesis contends that the rituals have impacted Shi'a-Sunni relations and that the nature of their relations has also influenced the mourning rituals. Stated somewhat differently, there is a cyclical influence between the rituals and Shi'a-Sunni relations. Most importantly, I successfully applied SRT and tested this theory within the context of a dominantly Muslim and Arab culture in Iraq. After contextualising the findings of this thesis within the arguments presented in the related literature, in the following sections, I will discuss the contribution of this thesis to the field of ritual studies.

8.2 The feedback process

This thesis addressed a crucial issue that SRT failed to tackle, namely the cyclical impact of rituals on social relations. As noted in Chapter Three, section 3.2.2, SRT does not seem to allow for or to establish a process of feedback in which the social impact of rituals ends up affecting and having an effect on other categories of analysis (ritual strength, the strategic use of rituals, and symbolic meanings of ritual). The findings show that the social outcomes of pre-2003 manifested in the restriction and banning of 'Ashura rituals, especially *ziyarat al-Arba'in,* has influenced the strength of the rituals after the fall of the Ba'ath Party, their strategic use, and symbolic meanings. Therefore, this thesis has attempted to modify the SRT by taking into consideration previous social outcomes when examining the impact of contemporary rituals on society. It is not a linear process as proposed by Jennifer Edwards and David Knottnerus (2010) and discussed in section 3.2.2, but it is cyclical impact represented by the red dashed lines shown in Figure 66.

The marginalisation of the Shi'a before 2003 was discussed is the analysis and it is well-argued in the related literature that the regime of Saddam Hussein did not trust the Shi'a (Jabar, 2011, Haddad, 2011, Nasr, 2016). After the regime fall, as discussed throughout the analysis, 'Ashura rituals came to symbolise the demise of a repressive regime that marginalised the Shi'a and

prevented them from observing their rituals and beliefs. They embraced public rituals, processions, to openly declare that they are free. The cyclical process is also evident, as the analysis shows, in the strategic use of the mourning rituals by the Shi'a religious establishment to enhance the weakened Shi'a identity after decades of marginalisation. The Sunni took note of the robust form of rituals emerged after 2003, as the findings indicate, and saw them as provocative acts. They also interpreted the rituals as a Shi'a triumph. Based on the aforementioned discussion, ignoring the impact of social order created by Ba'ath Party policies on the contemporary strength of 'Ashura rituals, their strategic use and symbolic meanings, can be described as incomplete.

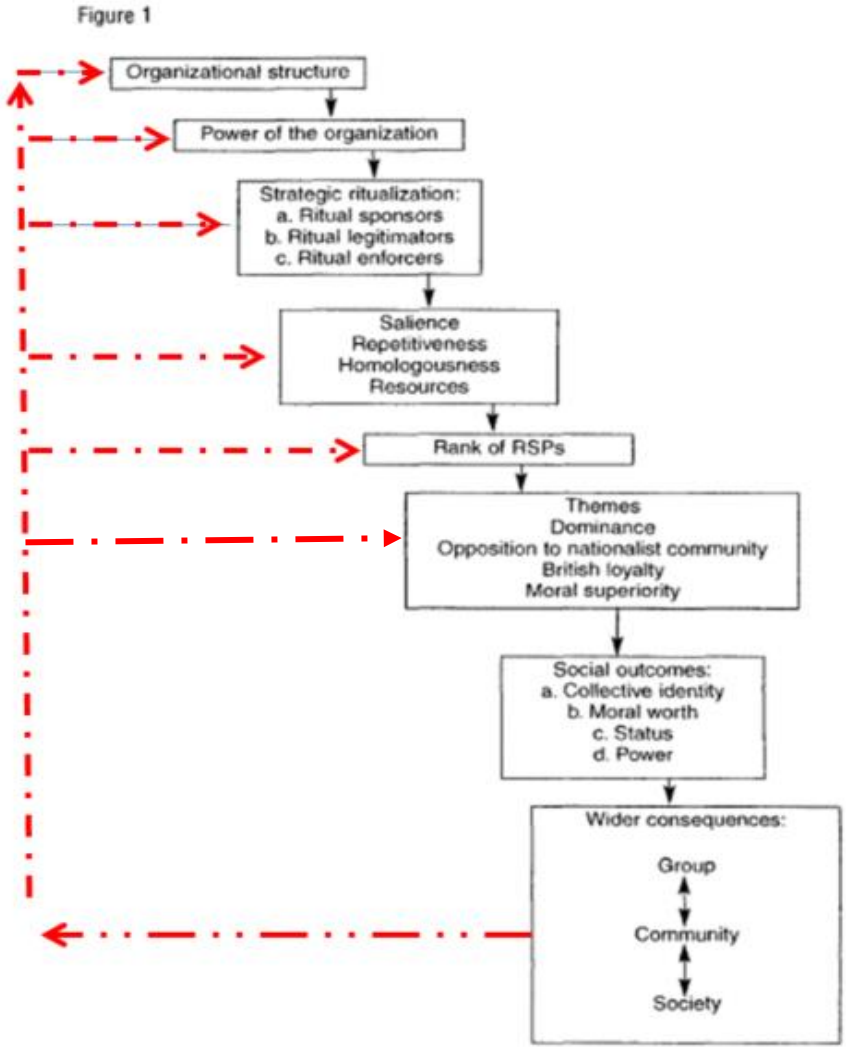


Figure 66 *A figure adopted from "The Orange Order: Parades, other Rituals, and Their Outcomes (2010), p. 16, by Jennifer Edwards and David Knottnerus and modified by the author.*

The findings of this thesis reveal that when the Shi‘a identity is threatened, the majority of Shi‘a participate in the mourning rituals, irrespective of their level of piety, not only those who believe in intercession or who imitate a *marja‘*. In addition, when the Shi‘a feel threatened whilst under the rule of pro-‘Ashura rituals Shi‘a-dominated government, the rituals tend to become over-exaggerated with extensive media coverage, managed strategically, repetitive, emotional, generously funded, and more visible, all of which exacerbate the impact of the rituals on the Sunnis.

As the finding demonstrates, the rituals have also been used strategically by *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi* to motivate its members and to intimidate its enemy, ISIS. *Al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi* promoted, organised, and funded *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* to ensure its success measured by massive turnout has also implicated the Sunni in Iraq. As the analysis further demonstrates, *al-Hashd* is seen by the majority of the Sunnis as sectarian force and their excessive adaptation of the mourning rituals perceived by the Sunnis as form of intimidation. The feedback process continues as the dominance of the mourning rituals resulted in resentment. My research identified many reasons for this trend, including that the rituals have come to represent a dysfunctional state, that some of the narratives adopted are comprised of myth, that the importance of the rituals is over-emphasised, that the rituals symbolise foreign-Iranian influence, and that these rituals are regarded as a form of intimidation. In 2017, ISIS was defeated and *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi*, along with international forces, was able to liberate all the territories that had been occupied by ISIS. As a result, the Shi‘a militias capitalised on their new status as victorious forces and increased their grip on power in Iraq (al-Qarawee, 2018).

8.3 Recommendation for future research

Drawing on the argument of the cyclical impact of rituals, and in light of the defeat of ISIS and the triumph of *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi* in Iraq, further studies are warranted to explore ‘Ashura ritual dynamics and their ongoing impact on Shi‘a-Sunni relations, especially within the context of victorious Shi‘a forces as discussed above. When a vibrant mass protest movement erupted in Baghdad and many Shi‘a provinces in October of 2019, described by Dodge (2020) as a secular, nationalist and anti-Iranian movement, this mass protest, as also noted by Ali (2019), was not sectarian and the main actors were mainly Shi‘a Iraqis protesting against corruption, lack of services, and the dominance of the Shi‘a religious and political elite and militias. Indeed, as al-

Khoei (2019, p.108) notes, “Iraq’s next big challenge after containing and ultimately defeating ISIS, will be dealing with the systemic corruption that plagues all state institutions, including the security services”.

The Sunnis in Iraq were in favour of this mass protest but refrained from joining the Shi‘a fearing severe retribution from the Shi‘a-dominated government. A common rationale for Iraqi Sunni disengagement in the protests is that the government would accuse them of being backed by the Islamic State of Iraq (ISIS) an accusation that, in their view, would not apply to the Shi‘a (Badawi, 2020). Notwithstanding, the Shi‘a militias (factions of *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi* and pro Iran regime) did not tolerate the protesters’ acts (Dodge, 2020). According to a report published by United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (2020, p. 6), extensive human rights violations and abuses, that appeared aimed at ending the protests, including the violent targeting by armed actors of protesters and persons expressing criticism of political parties and armed groups with various ties to the State, resulted in the killing of 487 protesters and the injury of 7,715 more at protest sites. Even though the protests of 2019 did not make an explicit link to ‘Ashura, going forward this recent development raises questions including but not limited to the following: Could ‘Ashura rituals be used strategically by the protesters to demand change to the political system of post-2003 Iraq? Could ‘Ashura rituals be used strategically by the Shi‘a religious establishment to influence such protests and possibly the outcomes of such a protest in the future? How could such a powerful mass protest affect the dominance and the visibility of the commemoration of ‘Ashura?

Another aspect that also warrants further studies is related to the increased regulation of ‘Ashura rituals by Shi‘i actors. I have argued that the Shi‘a religious establishment has been mainly interested in numbers of participants in the commemoration of ‘Ashura as a form of intimidating ISIS. I have also argued the commemoration lacks organisation and regulations. Recently, as noted in section 7.3.4.1, it seems more attention has been paid to the organisation and regulation of the commemoration by the Shi‘a religious establishment. It would be worthwhile to examine the increased regulations on the feedback process discussed in section 8.2, and how such move can affect the visibility of the rituals, emotions expressed by the rituals, and eventually the social outcomes of commemorating ‘Ashura.

On a separate note, ‘Ashura rituals are also practised in the United Kingdom especially the well-attended mourning processions which take place in London (Alibhai, 2018). Thus, further studies

would be beneficial to explore the impact of the mourning rituals of ‘Ashura on Shi‘a-Sunni relations in the UK. After discussing the thesis contribution to SRT, feedback process, and recommendation for future research, the focus of the discussion of the following sections is on the main challenges associated with conducting this research.

8.4 Challenges associated with researching the impact of ‘Ashura rituals

There are two main challenges associated with conducting this research: critically exploring sensitive religious and cultural practices in a traditional society and the fraught period that opened in Iraq because of the rise of ISIS. There are challenges associated with critically exploring sensitive religious and cultural practices in a traditional society where religious views are dominant. Many Shi‘a Muslims criticised me for focusing on the mourning rituals of ‘Ashura and questioned my intentions given that perhaps, for them, the commemoration of ‘Ashura is not a matter open to debate. Although it was discouraging at the time, it also provided me with a good understanding of the way some Shi‘a view ‘Ashura rituals. In addition, I have been told on many occasions that as an Iraqi, it is unacceptable to focus on differences between the two sects, particularly given the sensitive and fragile state of Shi‘a-Sunni relationships.

Challenges associated with the critical examination of the impact of ‘Ashura rituals was not limited to only Shi‘a participants. Many Sunni participants seemed to be sceptical of a researcher from a Shi‘a background exploring the impact on Shi‘a-Sunni relations of what has been perceived as a fundamental aspect of Shi‘ism. In my effort to recruit participants for the second stage of data analysis, I contacted many Sunni religious organisations and individuals, but the majority ignored or rejected my request for interviews. In an attempt to understand this trend, I raised this issue with those Sunni participants who were willing to participate in this research. One explanation provided is that it is perhaps due to mistrust that many Sunni are not willing to engage with these sensitive issues. I also raised this challenge with one of the key informants who had researched ‘Ashura rituals in the UK and found a similar tendency in that the Shi‘a are more willing than the Sunni to engage in academic research relating to Shi‘a cultural practices and beliefs.

In terms of the second challenge, which was related to the rise and the fall of ISIS between 2014 and 2017, the findings of this research are very much related to this crucial period. This research commenced in September 2015 and concluded in September 2019, and therefore coincided with

the rise and fall of ISIS. It was a very tense period for all Iraqis, but chiefly for the Shi'a, given that the terrorist activities were targeting them, particularly during the commemoration of 'Ashura. High emotions, conspiracy theories, and religious theories including the re-emergence of the last Imam dominated public discourse between 2014 and 2017. This in turn presented the challenge that the findings of this thesis cannot be replicated because the socio-political elements changed after the fall of ISIS. I have noticed that subsequent to the fall of ISIS, the Shi'a have become more vocal about their dissatisfaction with the government and Shi'a religious leaders, and the focus has shifted from terrorism to political parties and religious establishments.

8.5 Limitations

A limitation of this thesis is the inability to spend more time conducting fieldwork in Iraq due to personal safety concerns. This thesis would have greatly benefited from observing the mourning rituals of 'Ashura in different cities and neighbourhoods, including Sadr City, and Sunni neighbourhoods in Baghdad and the provinces and also by conducting interviews with locals in their respective cities and communities.

8.6 Chapter summary

In this chapter I discussed and contextualised the findings of this thesis, which sought to explore the impact of the mourning rituals of 'Ashura practiced by Shi'a Muslims on Shi'a-Sunni relations in Iraq. The discussion was presented according to the four main components of the SRT framework: 'Ashura rituals' strength, their strategic use, symbolic meanings of the rituals, and social outcomes. The missing argument of the SRT regarding the cyclical influence of rituals on social relations was also presented. This thesis modified the SRT by taking into consideration that the restriction and banning of the rituals before 2003 contributed to the prominence of the rituals after 2003. The study exhibits that, since 2003, 'Ashura rituals have come to signify more than simply the tradition of mourning. 'Ashura rituals now also symbolise Shi'a empowerment, and intimidation. Furthermore, this study reveals that the narrative of Karbala has been adopted by Shi'a-dominated governments and Shi'a militias, increasing the alienation of the Sunni and in turn, further complicating Shi'a-Sunni dynamics in Iraq and the surrounding region. Finally, recommendation for future studies, the challenges associated with conducting this research, and the limitation of this thesis were outlined.

9 Conclusion

This thesis explored the impact of the annual commemoration of ‘Ashura on Shi‘a-Sunni relations in Iraq. The Shi‘a and the Sunni are Muslims who have different views over Prophet Muhammad’s successor but their differences were exacerbated because of the battle of Karbala. In this battle, some members of the Prophet’s household including his grandson, Husayn, were humiliated and killed by an army led by a leader purportedly to be the Prophet’s successor. The women of Husayn’s family including Zainab, the granddaughter of the Prophet, were taken captive but returned to Karbala forty days after the killing of Husayn to mourn their dead.

Hussein (2018, p, 44) argues that the battle of Karbala is not an abstract theological and historical dispute: Muslims are still living through this unresolved quarrel. In Nakash’s (1993) view, the evocation of the Karbala episode was left to the Shi‘a through their annual commemoration of ‘Ashura. Whilst the Shi‘a continue to mourn the death of Husayn, the Sunni see more harm than good in remembering the tragedy of Karbala because, in their view, it activates animosity between Muslims. The ways the Shi‘a mourn the tragedy of Karbala have developed over the centuries mainly in accordance with the power-holder’s views of the rituals. Historically, the mourning rituals thrive and spread when the Shi‘a are in power. On rare occasions, and as a strategic move, a Sunni leader would allow the Shi‘a to practice their rituals. Despite this dynamic, the impact of the commemoration of ‘Ashura on Shi‘a-Sunni relations was not examined, especially given the prominence of the commemoration and the climate of heightened Shi‘a and Sunni identities in post-2003 Iraq. Most likely, as argued in the theoretical framework Chapter in this thesis, the commemoration was dismissed as an unadulterated Shi‘a traditions, concerning the Shi‘a themselves. This thesis, however, has taken a different approach and argues that the mourning rituals of the commemoration of ‘Ashura can be used strategically by Shi‘a elite, and rituals impact, intentionally, goes beyond the Shi‘a themselves.

This qualitative study found that the combination of SRT (Knottnerus, 1997) and the theories of the Iraqi sociologist, ‘Ali al-Wardi, are the most suitable to explore the impact of ‘Ashura rituals on Shi‘a-Sunni relations. In SRT, society can be restructured and relationships can be altered through the strategic use of robust rituals aimed at expressing certain and intended symbolic meanings. After all, SRT does not dismiss rituals as mundane traditions, nor limits their impact

only on those who observe them. SRT primarily examines the impact of rituals practised by groups, generally associated with power, on other groups nested within this environment. In addition to SRT, utilising al-Wardi's theories helped to understand some of the underlying characteristics of Iraqi society, especially given that SRT has not been applied within the context of a majority Arab culture such as in Iraq.

Guided by the four theoretical categories of the SRT, the strength of 'Ashura rituals, their strategic use, symbolic meanings of the rituals, and the social outcomes, the examination of relevant literature shows that the status of the commemoration of 'Ashura is influenced by power and politics. Within the context of power and Shi'a-Sunni relations, two main dates stand out: 1921, when modern Iraq was established with the Sunnis dominating the power structure, and 2003, the fall of Sunni power and the rise of Shi'a power in Iraq. Prior to 1921, the Shi'a religious establishment in Iraq had a considerable influence and used the commemoration of 'Ashura strategically to increase and/or maintain their influence. There is also evidence in the literature to support the argument that the rituals were used strategically by the Shi'a religious establishment in Iraq to unite the two sects in order to fight the British invaders in 1920.

During the period from the 1920s to 2003, the Sunni minority in Iraq held power. How to define the identity of the newly created state was one of the main challenges facing the successive Sunni-dominated governments. As a strategic move to contain the symbols and practices of the Shi'a majority, the commemoration of 'Ashura was initially restricted by successive Sunni-dominated governments (1921-1968) and subsequently banned under the rule of the Ba'ath Party (1968-2003), a nationalist pan-Arab political and revolutionary movement, which further disenfranchised and exasperated the Shi'a. Al-Wardi (1969) viewed the mourning rituals as dated practices, incompatible with the new reality created with the establishment of modern Iraq. Nakash (1994, p. 162), however, argues that under the pretext of abolishing superstitious beliefs, the Iraqi state succeeded in containing the public mourning processions of Karbala because they were viewed as a form of political protest. In 1977, the Ba'ath Party went to great lengths in its effort to prohibit the mourning procession of *ziyarat al-Arba'in*. The Ba'ath Party even portrayed the Shi'a religious establishment as promoter of sectarian tension, thus touching a most sensitive nerve in the relations between Shi'a and Sunni Iraqis. Nakash (1994) argues that the Ba'ath imposed harsh polices towards the mourning processions because these processions posed a real danger to the Sunni

dominance of the state of Iraq. In sum, all of these ritual dynamics negatively impacted the Shi‘a and weakened their identity.

In 2003, the US-led forces invaded Iraq and the regime of Saddam Hussein was toppled. Toppling the regime marked the end of Sunni domination as the Shi‘a majority assumed power for the first time in Iraq’s modern history. Since the fall of the regime of Saddam Hussein, the commemoration of ‘Ashura has emerged as the most powerful multi-dimensional event in Iraq, with reports estimating that millions of Shi‘a pilgrims, from Iraq and further afield, observing *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*.

Within the power structure of Iraq post-2003, the Shi‘a religious establishment has emerged as the most powerful entity, albeit unofficially (al-Qarawee, 2018). Despite its central and crucial position in post-2003 Iraq, there are many unknown aspects about the Shi‘a religious establishment (al-Qarawee, 2018; Corboz, 2016). Corboz (2016, p. 25) argues that the Shi‘a religious establishment is best described as an amorphous system of authority rather than an institution, internally organised in networks in which a number of individuals assume key functions. Irrespective of its ambiguous and non-transparent structure, the Grand *marja‘* ‘Ali al-Sistani is regarded as the most influential figure in this establishment. Al-Qarawee (2018) argues that al-Sistani emerged as the most powerful figure in Iraq for two main reasons. First, he filled a vacuum created by the fall of the authoritarian regime of Saddam Hussein and, secondly, he is trusted by the majority of Shi‘a in Iraq. Whilst his role in politics is perhaps vague, the perceived interpretations of the Grand *marja‘* actions, or the lack of action on certain issues, are relatively clear; he sees the Shi‘a dominating the political, religious, and social dimensions of Iraqi society.

Since 2003, Iraqi society has undergone numerous upheavals including civil war between the Shi‘a and the Sunni, the emergence of terrorist groups and militias (Dodge, 2020; Jabar, 2010; Haddad, 2020 and 2011; Nasr, 2016; Pierre, Hutchinson and Abdulrazak, 2007). Whilst there is no shortage of literature on theories analysing Shi‘a-Sunni relations since 2003, discussions on their dynamics suffer by ignoring cultural practices, including the commemoration of ‘Ashura. Similar to the Sunni elite attempt of controlling the narrative of national identity post 1921, the Shi‘a elite post-2003, too, have attempted to re-introduce and increase the presentation of Shi‘a symbols and practices into Iraqi national identity for the purpose of dominating it. Within this scant discussion, perhaps a major theme can be drawn related to the issue of defining or dominating Iraqi nationalism

in which Shi‘a symbols and practices have been used strategically to create a Shi‘a-centric state in Iraq (Haddad, 2016). Pierre, Hutchinson and Abdulrazak (2007) clearly argue that, under the supervision of al-Sistani, the tragedy of Karbala and the mourning rituals of ‘Ashura have been used as political tools to establish a Shi‘a state in Iraq and to promote the vision of Shi‘a political parties. Al-Sistani’s vision, however, is different than the Iranian model of a Shi‘a state, where a *marja‘* assumes the highest political position in the country.

After the examination of relevant literature, data was collected in three stages: content analysis of materials related to ‘Ashura rituals, observation of *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* in Karbala in November of 2016 (Stage One); survey and interviews with Shi‘a and Sunni Iraqis residing in Iraq or the UK (Stage Two); and, interviews with professionals who have knowledge about the mourning rituals and the Shi‘a-Sunni dynamics in Iraq (Stage Three). The findings show that *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* is the most powerful, visible form of the mourning rituals. Essentially, *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* creates more space for empowerment and belonging. The Shi‘a participants in this thesis also link the prominence of the mourning rituals in general and *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* in particular to the way the Shi‘a were mistreated before 2003 and have been targeted after 2003 by terrorist groups who vowed to eradicate them. This finding formed the core of this thesis contribution to the field of ritual studies. Based on this finding, I addressed a crucial issue that SRT failed to tackle, namely the cyclical impact of rituals on social relations arguing that the social impact of rituals ends up affecting and having an effect on other categories of analysis (ritual strength, the strategic use of rituals, and symbolic meanings of ritual).

In terms of the findings related to the second theoretical element of SRT, the strategic use of rituals, it was also apparent that there has been a specific interest by the Shi‘a religious establishment in sponsoring, and promoting the mourning rituals with utmost interest in *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*. I also found the forces created by the Shi‘a religious establishment, *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi*, have a vested interest in *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*. The analysis shows that there are many ideal attributes to *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*, which motivated both the Shi‘a religious establishment and *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi* to embrace and promote it. In particular, it is popular with Shi‘a masses, public and peaceful, non-violent, unlike *tatbir* for example, it unites Shi‘a Iraqis and draws out their best features including generosity, and raises the profile of women given the central role of Zainab in commemorating the *al-Arba‘in*. The influential *ziyarat al-Arba‘in* has been used by the Shi‘a religious establishment

to enhance the weakened Shi‘a identity hence decades of marginalisation prior to 2003, and to intimidate the enemies of the Shi‘a, especially ISIS.

According to the findings, within the period when ISIS posed an existential threat to the Shi‘a, the mourning rituals symbolised Shi‘a dominance, loyalty to sect, and intimidation. When the Shi‘a wear black, cry and weep loudly in public, and engage in self-flagellation, they want to be heard and acknowledged, creating a dominant voice to silence all others. Given that their identity is at risk, it was only evident that the mourning rituals expressed loyalty to sect. For Sunni participants, there is disproportional increase in time and space in which the mourning rituals came to occupy, they have no religious values or base, they are stripped of national symbols, and mainly practiced by ignorant masses who blindly follow the *marja‘iyya*. Some of them argued that the mourning rituals complicated with a sectarian undertone, was used to intimidate the Sunnis, especially during the fight with ISIS.

As per the findings concerning the social outcome of commemorating ‘Ashura, especially *ziyarat al-Arba‘in*, enhancing Shi‘a identity is at the cost of Sunni identity. The rituals were viewed adversely by the Sunnis, something that affected their relations with the Shi‘a. The findings also indicate that resentment towards the mourning rituals, especially after the defeat of ISIS, was on the rise, mainly because the rituals came to represent a dysfunctional state, that some of the narratives adopted are comprised of myth, that the importance of the rituals is over-emphasised, that the rituals symbolise foreign-Iranian influence, and that these rituals are regarded as a form of religious intimidation. Most importantly, people resented the rituals because the rituals promulgated ideal views such as rising up against injustice and fighting corruption that did not correlate to their own reality. It is true that the Shi‘a religious establishment managed to defeat ISIS, but corruption, lack of services, and the presence of militias that do not pay allegiance to the state remain very challenging to the overall stability in Iraq. Drawing on the argument of the cyclical impact of rituals, and in light of the defeat of ISIS and the triumph of *al-Hashd al-Sha‘bi* in Iraq, further studies are warranted to explore ‘Ashura ritual dynamics and their ongoing impact on Shi‘a-Sunni relations.

In summary, ‘Ashura rituals are viewed as a powerful sect-focused ‘Shi‘a’ system corresponding to various circumstances and contexts, altering relationships and creating changes within Iraqi society. For almost 1400 years, the rituals have played a crucial role in maintaining Shi‘a identity.

It is reasonable to assert that the Shi‘a as a sect would not exist without the mourning rituals of ‘Ashura. Every year, the rituals bring to the fore an intra-Muslim struggle dating back to 680. Depending on the symbolic meanings expressed by the mourning rituals, Muslims react differently to the commemoration leading to discussions, disagreements, and raising sensitivities and tensions, which in some cases is manifested in physical attacks and altercations.

Overall, the findings of this research have moved to the fore practices and rituals to commemorate the tragedy of Karbala, which are often dismissed as irrelevant or taboo, placing them on the front line with other crucial factors impacting Shi‘a-Sunni relations such as doctrinal differences and competing religious truths, power struggles, economic competition, and foreign influence. Finally, the findings of this thesis are in line with the main argument put forward by SRT, which regards rituals as crucial human behaviours and not irrelevant or irrational acts, saturated with symbolism, and not mundane traditions, that have consequences and impact on others.

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11 Appendix 1: Glossary of terms

Ahl al-bayt: People of the Household' of the Prophet - the Prophet's daughter, Fatima, her husband 'Ali, and their two sons, Hassan and Husayn. Also spelled as *ahlualbayt*.

Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi: an Iraqi state-sponsored umbrella organisation composed of some 40 militias that are mostly Shi'a Muslim groups. In 2014, when ISIS threatened to capture Baghdad and the shrine cities, the *marja'iyya*, represented by Grand Ayatullah (the highest title granted to a Shi'a religious leader and intellectual), 'Ali al-Sistani, issued a *fatwa* (religious decree) to defend the country, its people and its shrine cities. The call immediately mobilised tens of thousands of Shi'a volunteers to form what has become known as *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* (The People's Mobilisation), to fight against ISIS (Abbas, 2017).

al-Arba'in: meaning 'forty', *al-Arba'in* or the Fortieth is commemorated annually 40 days after the commemorations of the death of Imam Husayn on the 10th of Muharram (al-Hilli, 2017).

'Ashura: the tenth day of the first Islamic month, Muharram, which coincides with the anniversary of the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD in which Imam Husayn, son of 'Ali ibn abi Talib and third Imam of the Shi'a, was killed (Nakash, 1994).

'Ashura rituals: the mourning rituals to commemorate the battle of Karbala. They have many other names including the rituals of Muharram, Muharram observance, and *al-Sha'aer al- Husseiniyah* (Haddad, 2011, p. 11).

Ayatullah: 'sign of God', a title granted to a Shi'a *mujtahid* or a *marja'* (Corboz, 2016).

Caliph: a leader of a Muslim community who adhere to the Sunni interpretation of Islam (Nakash, 1994).

Daesh: in Arabic, the jihadist group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant has called itself *ad-Dawlah al-Islamiyah fi l-Iraq u l-Sham*. Whilst the English acronym is ISIS, an Arabic-derived acronym is *Daesh* or *Da'ish* (Abbas, 2017).

Fitna: any issue that creates division among Muslims which normally leads to great upheaval (Husain, 2018).

Ghadir khumm: according to Shi'a tradition, a few weeks before his death, at a place called Ghadir Khumm, the Prophet Muhammad named 'Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, as his successor (Shomali, 2003).

Al-Hawza al-'Ilmiyya: the Seminary of Shi'i Islamic studies. The *hawza* is constituted of several seminaries associated with senior Grand Ayatullahs and hence the term is often used synonymously with *marja'iyya* (Corboz, 2016).

Hayder: a nick name given to the first Shi'a Imam, 'Ali, for his bravery. It means 'lion' (al-Haidari, 2007).

Husseiniyah: Temporary or permanent site where ritual ceremonies commemorating the life and martyrdom of the Imam Husayn are held. In the Iraqi vernacular, the term is used to refer to a Shi'a prayer hall or mosque. *Husseiniyahs* also act as social hubs and have on occasion played a role in communal politics (al-Haidari, 2007).

Husseinite images: visual materials that represent the battle of Karbala (al-Haidari, 2007).

Latum: the ritual of chest-beating (al-Haidari, 2007).

Latumiya: emotional poetry narrating the suffering of *ahl al-bayt* in Karbala where *latum* is performed (al-Haidari, 2007).

Marja'(plural - *maraji'*): a *mujtahid* who is seen to be qualified to provide guidance on all points of religious practices and law in Shi'a Islam (Corboz, 2016, p. ix).

Marja'iyya (also known as the Shi'a religious establishment and the Shi'a clerical authority): the Shi'a sources of emulation or authorities of referral (*maraji' al-taqlid* – singular *marja' al-taqlid*) (Corboz, 2016).

Mathhab (plural-*mathahib*): a School of Islamic jurisprudence. The main *mathahib* are the Hanbali, Hanafi, Maliki and Shafi'i schools of Sunni jurisprudence and the Ja'afari school of jurisprudence which refers to Twelver Shi'as (Shi'a who follow the Twelve Imams). The term is sometimes used in a manner synonymous to 'sect'.

Mujtahid: a Shi'a religious scholar who is qualified to use independent reasoning to derive laws (Corboz, 2016, p. x).

Mulayea: a female reciter who laments by reading elegies about Imam Husayn with the purpose of emotionally charging her audience (al-Haidari, 2007).

Niyahah: a very emotional recitation of rhythmic lamentation poetry (Al-Haidari, 2007).

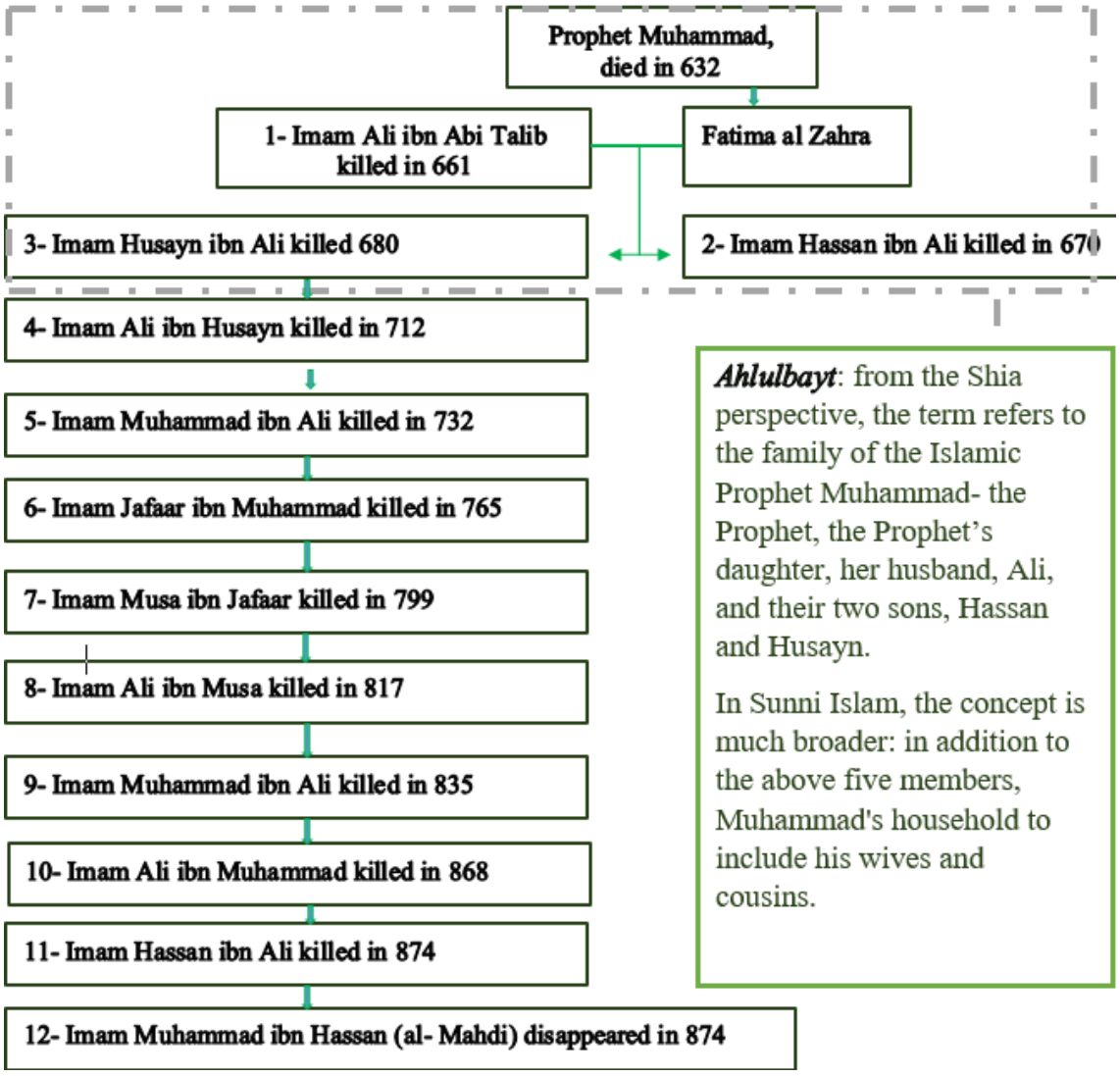
Raduood: a reciter who laments by reading elegies about Imam Husayn with the purpose of emotionally charging his audience (al-Haidari, 2007).

Sayyid (plural-*sadah*): those claiming descent from the lineage of the House of the Prophet Muhammad (Corboz, 2016).

Ziyarat 'Ashura: a salutatory prayer to Husayn and the martyrs of the Battle of Karbala. Whilst the prayer is part of the liturgy used in pilgrimages to the shrine of Husayn in Karbala on 'Ashura, it can be recited anywhere with the condition of facing Karbala, representing a symbolic visit to the shrine of Husayn (al-Haidari, 2007).

12 Appendix 2: Shi‘a Imams

Imam: At its simplest, the term refers to the leader of group prayers. Sunni Muslims use the title for their prominent jurists and clerics-such as the founders of the schools of Sunni jurisprudence (Haddad, 2011). In Shi‘a Islam the Imam is the divinely appointed successor of the Prophet Muhammad and is regarded as infallible. Twelver Shi‘a (majority of Iraqi Shi‘as) are labelled as such due to their belief in twelve such Imams beginning with ‘Ali ibn abi Talib and ending with Mohammad al-Mahdi who Twelver Shi‘a believe went into occultation in the 9th century and is destined to return near the end of times (as shown in the diagram below). The term Imam is also used to refer to clerical luminaries; for example: Imam al-Khoei, Sayyid ‘Ali al-Sistani’s predecessor (Haddad, 2011). However, for the purpose of this research, the Imam refers to a leader chosen by God.



* *Ahlulbayt* is also spelled as *ahl al-bayt*

13 Appendix 3: Request for interview participants

[Date here]

Dear Iraqi worshipers,

I would like to invite you to be part of a research project that I am conducting. This project is part of the requirement for a PhD in Intercultural Studies, at Heriot-Watt University. My name is Jafar Ahmad and my credentials with Heriot-Watt University can be established by calling Professor Jemina Napier, Department Head at [phone #] or by contacting my Academic Supervisors, Professors Pablo La Porte and Chris Tinker at [email address].

The objective in conducting this research project is to explore the annual commemoration of ‘Ashura (‘Ashura rituals) observed by millions of Iraqi Shi‘a Muslims, and its impact on Sunni Muslims and Shi‘a -Sunni relations in Iraq. My research project will consist of interviews with both Shi‘a and Sunni Iraqis. Each interview will be comprised of seven open-ended questions and is foreseen to last between approximately half an hour and an hour. The foreseen questions will be in regard to ‘Ashura rituals and their impact on Shi‘a -Sunni relations in Iraq.

Information will be recorded in both hand-written and audio-recorded format and, where appropriate summarized, in anonymous format, in the body of the final report. At no time will any specific comments be attributed to any individual. All documentation will be kept strictly confidential, in accordance with Heriot-Watt University ethical criteria.

The information collected from these interviews will be stored in a password protected hard drive and will be destroyed upon completion of this research. Please note for those participants who elect to withdraw at any time in the research project, up to the writing of the final report, that all information from their interview will be destroyed. Following transcription of each interview, each participant will be offered an opportunity to review the transcript to ensure accuracy.

Please feel free to contact me at any time should you have additional questions regarding the project and its outcomes. You are not compelled to participate in this research project. If you do choose to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without prejudice. Similarly, if you choose not to participate in this research project, this information will also be maintained in confidence.

Please reply to this invitation by Date here, if you are interested in taking part in this research.

If you would like to participate in my research project, please contact me at:

Name: Jafar Ahmad

Email: Telephone: [phone #]

Sincerely, Jafar Ahmad

14 Appendix 4: Consent form

My name is Jafar Ahmad, and this research project is part of the requirement for a PhD in Intercultural Studies, at Heriot-Watt University. My credentials with Heriot-Watt University can be established by calling Professor Jemina Napier, Department Head at [phone #] or by contacting my Academic Supervisors, Professors Pablo La Porte and Chris Tinker at [email address].

This document constitutes an agreement to participate in my research project, the objective of which is to explore the annual commemoration of ‘Ashura (‘Ashura rituals) observed by millions of Iraqi Shi‘a Muslims and its impact on Sunni Muslims and Shi‘a -Sunni relations in Iraq. This aspect of my research project will consist of interviewing Shi‘a and Sunni Iraqis and is foreseen to last an hour maximum. The foreseen questions will be in regard to ‘Ashura rituals and its impact on Shi‘a -Sunni relations in Iraq.

Information will be recorded in both hand-written and audio-recorded format and, where appropriate summarized, in anonymous format, in the body of the final report. At no time will any specific comments be attributed to any individual. All documentation will be kept strictly confidential, in accordance with Royal Roads University ethical criteria.

The information collected from the interview will be stored in a password protected hard drive and will be destroyed upon completion of this research. Please note for those participants who elect to withdraw at any time in the research project, up to the writing of the final report that, all information from their interview will be destroyed. Following transcription of each interview, each participant will be offered an opportunity to review the transcript to ensure accuracy. Also, participants will be informed that they will have the opportunity, if they wish, to have the findings sent to them electronically. You are not compelled to participate in this research project. If you do choose to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without prejudice. Similarly, if you choose not to participate in this research project, this information will also be maintained in confidence. By signing this letter, you give free and informed consent to participate in this project.

Name: (Please Print): _____

Signed: _____

Date: _____

15 Appendix 5: List of relevant websites

Shi‘a sources

The official English language website of Imam Hussein Holy Shrine. Available at: https://imamhussain.org/english/.

The official English language Twitter page of the Holy Shrine of Imam Hussain @ImamHusainMedia.

The official Arabic Twitter page of Holy Shrine of Imam Hussain @imamhussainorg.

The official Arabic language Twitter page of the Holy Shrine of Abbas @AlkafeelAbbas.

The official Arabic language Twitter page of the Holy Shrine of Imam Ali @imamalinet.

The official English Twitter page of The Holy Shrine of Imam Reza @ImamRezaEN.

The official Website of the Office of His Eminence Al-Sayyid Ali Al-Husseini Al-Sistani. Available at: https://www.sistani.org/english/.

The official Website (Arabic and English) of the Office of Grand Ayatullah Sayyid M.S.Al-Hakeem. Available from: http://www.alhakeem.com/en.

The official English language Twitter page of the Office of the Eminent Religious Authority and Islamic Jurist, Grand Ayatullah Sayyid Mohammad Taqi Al-Husseini Al-Modarresi @GrandAyatullah.

The official Website of Sayyid Mahdi Almodarresi. Available from: http://www.modarresi.org/english/index.htm.

The official Arabic language Twitter page of Sayyid Muqtada al-Sadr @Mu_AlSadr.

The official Arabic language Twitter page of Sayyid Ali_AltaIqan @Ali_AltaIqani.

The official English language Twitter page of Imam Sayyid ‘Ali Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader @es_Khamenei.

The official Arabic language Twitter page of Imam Sayyid ‘Ali Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader @ar_Khamenei.

The10thDay, An Imam Hussain awareness organisation. Available on Twitter @The10thDayMedia and also the 10th day.com.

Who is Hussain. A grassroots social justice movement, inspired by the timeless legacy of a man called Hussain. Twitter account: @WhoIsHussain.

The Arabic official Twitter account of Mulla Basim Karbalaei: @BasimKarbalaei.

The Official account of Shia Rights Watch (SRW). Twitter account: @ShiaRightsWatch. Also available at: http://shiarightswatch.org/.

Ahlulbayt TV, Islamic English television channel. Twitter account: @AhlulbaytTV. Also available at: http://ahlulbayt.tv/home/.

AL Ahad TV, Iraqi television channel. Twitter account: @AhadTv. Also available at: https://alahad.tv.iq/.

AL Anwar TV, Iraqi television channel. Twitter account: @alanwartv2. Also available at: http://anwartv2.com/.

Karbala TV, the official television of the Holy Shrine of Imam Hussain. Titter account: @karbala_com. Also available at: https://www.karbala-tv.net/.

Al Forat TV, the Arabic language television channel owned by Ammar al-Hakim, an Iraqi Shi'a cleric and politician. Twitter account: @alforattv. Also available at: http://alforattv.net/.

Al-Kawthar TV, a Tehran-based Arabic-language television channel. Available from: https://www.alkawthartv.com/.

Al Hujja TV, an Arabic -language television channel. The official Arabic Twitter account of Al Hujja TV: @AlhujjaTv.

Alghadeer TV, an Arabic -language television channel. The official Arabic Twitter account of Alghadeer TV: @alghadeer_tv.

Official English Twitter of Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) Fighting ISIS in Iraq (Media Directorate), @warmediateam.

Official Arabic Twitter of Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) Fighting ISIS in Iraq (Media Directorate), @warmediateam.

Sunni sources

Wesal TV, Islamic English television channel. Twitter account: @Wesal_TV. Also available at: http://tvwesal.com/.

Fallujah TV, Iraqi Arabic television channel. Twitter account: @fallujahtv. Also available at: http://alfallujah.tv/.

MENHAJ AL-SUNNAH: The First Islamic Chatroom in Paltalk in Arabic language. Twitter account: @menhag_alsunh.